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## **Omniculturalism: Pan Populi As the Multicultural End-Point**

Some time ago, I was approached to review a set of volumes dealing with different ethnic groups in Australia.

As it happened, on the day I began to write the review, the Melbourne daily, *The Age*, carried a short item reporting comments that the then-Premier of Western Australia, Mr Burke, made vis-a-vis immigration. In summary, although he spoke specifically within the context of developing Australia's north, he advocated a doubling of Australia's intake of migrants; he proposed the continuation of the existing mix rather than concentration upon any particular group; and he argued that an increase in immigration would expand links with other nations, enhance trade prospects and create a larger domestic market, adding that without a healthy migration program, Australia faced a declining or at best static population during the next century, and asserting, too, that the great wave of national development in the 1950s and 60s was largely brought about by a vigorous immigration program.

If evidence were sought for support of Premier Burke's position, then one needed scarcely look beyond the series of volumes before me which told, among others, of Afghans and Czechs, Cornish and Spanish, Germans and Lebanese, Scandinavians and Jews, and Americans, Hungarians and Poles in Australia. All the same, one could also turn to another series on ethnic groups, this one issued by Nelson Publishers, or to still another contained in *The Bulletin* over some twelve weeks in 1976, while various other researchers had written full-length studies of Greeks and Germans, Hungarians, Poles, Jews and Italians, while an escalating number of studies also appeared about the Aborigines. In the same breath, one could add James Jupp's landmark bicentenary work, *The Australian People*, and, more recently, a multi-author collection of papers delivered at a conference titled *Cultural Diversity in Australian Society*. This listing does not pretend to comprehensiveness, but it does point to a generally increased recognition of, interest in, and receptiveness to the ethnic voice.

Before proceeding to other, more immediate matters, a number of facts would bear reflecting upon: the fact, for example, that the first European to visit Van Diemen's Land, Abel Tasman, was a Dutchman, whose ship, the *Zeehaen*, had a Danish mate; the fact that two Scandinavian botanists, Solander and Sporing, as well as the more often evoked Englishman Joseph Banks, accompanied James Cook on his 1769-71 voyages of discovery, as did three American seamen, while on his second voyage he was accompanied by two

Poles, at least three Germans and a Swede; and that eight Jews (perhaps fourteen) were in the First Fleet that sank the British flag into Australian soil, this very act of establishing a colony at Botany Bay nearly provoking a war with Spain which had itself sought to establish colonies in Australia and New Guinea to facilitate direct trade between Spain and the Philippines across the south-western trans-Pacific route. (Rumour has it, too, that Governor Arthur Phillip's father, Jacob Phillip, was a Frankfurt-born, possibly Jewish, language teacher who had married an English woman, while part of the British Army contingent on the First Fleet which he commanded were German).

That Australia in the event became British (or, as some would have it, Anglo-Celtic) was not a planned act of providence wrought by some divinity on high. It was, rather, the result of pure chance, of politics, of power play, and, for England, of commercial and social necessity, expediency and seized opportunity. Any one of the several great eighteenth-century maritime powers could, with but the slightest turn of fortune's wheel or, more correctly, of a helm, have established itself upon this antipodean continent of *Terra Australis Incognita*, so long postulated beforehand, so long actively sought for. And who knows whether, had the continent indeed been settled by free Dutch, Spanish, Portuguese, or French perhaps, it might not have got off to a better – certainly a different – social, economic and cultural start than it did, peopled as it was by criminals, scoundrels and outcasts as the first of its permanent and unwilling residents? This is speculation, to be sure, but it is also accompanied by an implicit appeal for humility and grace in such who would hold to sacrosanct doctrines of Anglo tenure or to superiority over, say, Hellenes, Latins, Slavs, Orientals, Iberians, Semites, Magyars, and any number of others who have settled on Australian soil and played their part in the nation's evolution.

And these peoples *have* played their part, as they continue still to play it. Names such as Mahomet Alum, von Mueller, Strzelecki, Lhotsky, Jurgensen, Utzon, Domahidy, Dezsery, Carboni, Schlunke, Kardachi, Monash, Vaskess, Waten, Tsaloumas, Abdullah, Kefala – just a few chosen from a multitude – these names are scarcely indigenous to the mainstream lexicon of Australian names. At which point, one may well ask: how many of those names which are in fact mainstream today were actually Anglicised and surrendered their distinctiveness at times when anonymous submergence of the self into the mass was the tacitly-expected thing to do: the son of a Norwegian called Larsen being christened Henry Lawson, or a Simcha Baevski becoming a Sidney Myer? While, if they were to look into their closets, how many present-day Smiths, Browns, Joneses, Cooks and Lewises might find there a withered nest of Schmidts, Braunschweigers, Johansens, Kochs and Levis?

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So much for history on one foot, as it were. So much, also for names. But what of the migrant contribution that Premier Burke both recognised and ap-

plauded. Well, let us perhaps take the Afghans, who, imported as expert cameleers from as far afield as Afghanistan, Baluchistan, the Punjab and the Turkish Empire, participated from the 1860s well into the 1930s in the expansion of inland transport of ore, wool, timber and other provisions, were involved in the building of telegraph lines, border fences, roads, railways and dams, and brought Islam into this, the fifth, continent. Take the Americans, who were prominent among the early sealers and whalers and goldminers, and proved themselves able developers of trade, coach transport, road systems and telegraph installations, not to mention specifically an architect like Walter Burley Griffin, a politician such as King O'Malley, and the many unnamed who helped bring Ford, General Motors, Colgate Palmolive and General Electric to Australia. And so on. There is, I believe, scarcely one person who could not point to any number of Czechs, Jews, Italians, Germans, Greeks, Poles, Balts and others who have, at different times, but particularly after World War II, enhanced Australian life.

Which brings us a step closer to our destination.

Australia consists of many peoples; it comprises many cultures. It is, ipso facto, a multicultural society. Meanwhile, the official policy of multiculturalism, while encouraging the fostering of such a society, while according all Australians, regardless of origin, race, language or religion, the right and the opportunity to express and share their individual cultural heritage, simply recognises the existing reality of an Australia that is already culturally and ethnically pluralist.

For some, this begs the question: Is such a society desirable? After all, was not the earlier ideal of a homogeneous society to be preferred, that society being more pure, less problematic, more amenable to developing sharply-defined identity as a unique and separate nation? Is not a society comprising so many different, even mutually antagonistic, component parts at risk of divisiveness, fragmentation, discord? One needs only point at national tensions and upheavals abroad and at the resurgent loyalties and partisanship they evoke here to recognise that these questions are more than merely hypothetical, even if thus far, excesses here have been contained.

Perhaps the earlier model was more pure, more trouble-free, more advanced along the road towards shaping a certain clearly-envisaged, wished-for identity; perhaps not. While the question may be legitimate, it is, however, no longer relevant, just as any modern-day assimilationist position is irrelevant, having been superseded by reality. Besides, the assimilationist push is based upon a conceit we should never tolerate in an individual: that the identity, that the ethos of a nation, be cast in the image of one's self as one perceives that image – a view that is the stuff of unashamed narcissistic nationalism. Further, whatever the short-term gains of an instituted assimilationist thrust, a nation cannot effectively program its future or determine its identity beyond anything more than a limited period. Even seemingly rock-solid social, political and national monoliths change, subject as they are to multitudes of

concurrent and crisscrossing forces of varying momentousness; so that even the Soviet Unions, Chinas, Indias, Polands, Britains, Americas, Germanys, South Africas of one day are not necessarily those countries of another. Evolution is a powerful force not at all confined to the natural world of fauna and flora, and, however much a man may wish for a politically, culturally, socially or racially constant and homogeneous nation, events will invariably supersede his wishes, to the extent that were he somehow to return to earth, say thirty, fifty, certainly a hundred years after his death, he could well be seen gladly hastening back to his grave.

Suppose that same man is rewarded by a *rein kultur*, a pure culture. What would be the price needing to be paid for it? What would be the loss incurred by the gain?

In the volume, *Multicultural Australia*, referred to earlier, Davis McCaughey, former Governor of Victoria, writes:

Many of the most creative periods in human society have been multicultural in character ... Again and again ... creative developments have taken place when diverse cultures have come into contact with each other. Multiculturalism should be seen not primarily as a problem but an opportunity.

Later, he adds:

We in this country are already multicultural in our origin or background, and are thus more interesting for it.  
A certain experience of exile, separation from one's origins, even alienation, is not necessarily stultifying. It may even be creative.

The gain to the assimilationist might be some utopian vision of a marvellous comfortably homogeneous milieu, of an agreeably unthreatening and undemanding uniformity of thought, action, taste, loyalty and belief, and of a familiar and assured, predictable future; in short, the safe harbour of being a pea in the company of other peas in an otherwise undifferentiated soup – his conceit being thereby compounded by self-deceit. But the loss! What would be the loss – given that our national purist would even deem it a loss at all? The loss would be all that which, by snubbing other peoples, by shunning other cultures, by silencing others who might contain whole inner worlds to unravel, would not be had. To which other losses – could be added – for example, lost, unfulfilled and stunted inner lives, unrealised talents, unconsummated visions and the silenced voices sacrificed before the deity which would have “Bloody foreigner” written menacingly across its teeth.

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As already indicated, Australia is, by definition, a multicultural society and the policy of multiculturalism renders *de jure* recognition to a well-established *de facto* situation. One would like to think that here the matter was sealed and settled beyond any further discussion.

Hardly!

Brian Johns, the Executive Director of the Special Broadcasting Service (SBS), in his own paper in *Multicultural Australia*, quotes a second person as saying:

there is no problem with the idea of multiculturalism if you look upon it as a journey, not as a destination.

For most, the idea and the translation of the idea into overt expression may indeed be a journey; but it is, however, also a destination, one towards which that journey has a certain distinct orientation and thrust. What the practical end-point of multiculturalism is – or ought to be – will be elaborated upon later. Suffice it for the moment, however, to say that a primary aim of any multicultural policy must be the inclusion, without stint, of Aboriginal, say, or Hungarian, Italian, Vietnamese or Pole, even while remaining unapologetically Aboriginal, Hungarian, Italian, Vietnamese or Pole, as active players in the larger Australian team; and, that, by promoting the contribution by all to the wider scope of Australian life, all may in turn benefit from the expanded dimensions and experiences and opened up to them, both from within the country and, by such sensitisation and through the establishment of a larger ethnic audience, from without – through film, say, through literature, music, dance, folklore, art.

Reference was made a moment ago to contribution by all. The question hence arises: where does the ethnic input stand *vis-a-vis* the indigenous? Or, to be more specific, what is the relationship of ethnic writing to the Australian literary mainstream? This leads to other questions: What, indeed, is the true Australian literary mainstream and what are its bounds? Is it the domain of the White Anglo-Celtic Male, the current, for instance, that links Lawson and Paterson, the Jindyworobaks and the Lindsays, the *Bulletin* mob and those who would be their modern-day successors? Is it the stream that today carries, say, Carey and Moorhouse, Wilding and Foster, Oakley and Dickins, clever writers all, to be sure, but at what remove from Patrick White and Xavier Herbert, say, and George Johnston and Randolph Stow? And if gender is in any way a determinant of those who define the mainstream, where do the women fit? Barbara Baynton, for instance, or Katherine Susannah Pritchard, Henry Handel Richardson, Eleanor Dark, Christina Stead, Amy Witting or Elizabeth Jolly? And where would one place Beverley Farmer, Judah Waten, Fay Zwicky, Zeny Giles, Lolo Houbein, David Martin, George Papaellinas, Manfred Jurgensen, Maria Lewitt, Angelo Loukakis, Lily Brett, even myself, who, whether through birth and/or the content of their work, would appear to have their feet in both the ethnic and the indigenous camp.

One would be foolhardy to agree to being pinned to a single answer, for who rightly knows? Such questions, and any answers that may here be offered revolve more on definitions than on substance, and definitions are in such matters so often arbitrary, subjective, predicated on biases, and, fre-



quently, based on quite untenable and unexamined preconceptions. Substance is what truly matters. Accordingly, what was once deemed mainstream may today well be, or tomorrow become, a dried-up river-bed, just as that which is today a faint trickle may yet be the source of future deep, wide and turbulent waters. It may be salutary to contemplate how many of the older writers just listed are today read with any telling frequency. Ethnic writing, in turn, is not something to be set apart from Australian literature. It is but one tributary, even if, against the mainstream, it is a relatively small one. But, despite the size, what is important is that even this small stream be kept flowing; kept flowing through grants, fellowships, journals (as is already exemplified in the existence of *Outrider*), anthologies, single-author books, festivals, translations, and secondary and higher education courses which would, quality for quality, give similar parity to ethnic writing as to any other literature written here. In short, what is asked is that the ethnic contribution be encouraged, recorded, studied, analysed and integrated into Australian literature as an indispensable part. This is a plea, to be sure, but one thing must be stressed. A moment ago, the deliberate point was made: "quality for quality". The plea is for ethnic writing to be accepted on its merits. Just as one would be right to deplore its unjust neglect, one would be well counselled to deplore favoured treatment simply because "ethnic is in", say, or because higher powers have piously instituted a "Be Kind to the Ethnic" Year and an author conveniently happens to be ethnic at the rising of the tide. Little would so quickly discredit ethnic writing as the active promotion of the second-rate. The last thing asked for, then, even while asking also that the reading public take notice, is condescension, paternalism, or the superior airs of patronage that would humour the recipient while amusing, or salving the conscience of, the patron.

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No doubt, in saying multiculturalism, both in its theory and translation into practice, is a good thing, I am here speaking to the converted; and some may wonder why others find it so troublesome.

One concern that I have is that multiculturalism as a deliberate policy of sponsoring ethnic programmes may prove to be something of a passing bandwagon, an "Ethnic is in" catchword of the eighties and nineties. After all, there is nothing in Australia's Constitution that states that any government of the day is obliged to promote and financially contribute towards ethnic culture in its different forms. With the advent, at any time, of some new conceptual social model, a government could quite easily adopt a wholly laissez-faire policy of leaving each ethnic group to its own devices and resources – a kind of deregulation or privatisation, if you will.

Second, there is, in some quarters, patent resistance to and resentment against the perceived Cinderella-type treatment extended to ethnic outlets and institutions, where the same public funds could well be directed towards

other more pressing social and economic needs or, the arts, towards works with more specifically Australian content than to a raggle-taggle on the fringe of mainstream Australian culture.

Third, and not unrelated, is the concern critics have that the official support given to multicultural expression contributes to divisiveness in Australian society, rather than to the promotion of the unity and consensus that ought to be aimed for. To them, the attainment of unity might well mean a preference for conformity and the loss of separate cultural expression and mores, but they far prefer this to the risk of an "us and them" polarisation.

On the theoretical level, however, but for different reasons, one could also be rightly nagged by arguments which have seen multiculturalism variously as 1) an extension of neocolonialism, 2) a backward-looking social philosophy which tries to understand and define Australia in terms of where one has come from rather than where one is, and 3) an expression of the cultural cringe which would deny that there is an Australian culture in terms of which to understand one's presence in the world and on which to graft one's aspirations.

As is the case with definitions, such statements are subjective, purely interpretive, and stem from private biases, influences and preconceptions; and, given the imprecise and very abstract nature of the argument that they raise, cannot be engaged in discussion at all fruitfully.

More serious is this: once discussion of multiculturalism is reduced to such abstractions as "neocolonialism" and "cultural cringe" with all the pejorative connotations now inherent in them, or relies upon a view of Australian culture or Australian society as a distinctly-recognisable, clearly-defined, virtually immutable given – all questions of implied superiority aside – then we are led to adopt the language of the ivory-towered pigeon-holing academician or complacent Citizen John divorced from the the real world out there which defies sweeping statements, which scorns categorisation and which cuts across pontification, by very virtue of the fact that, in it, there course human beings, people, individuals all – yes, even ethnics – who possess individual, ineradicable pasts, who have grown up with similarly individual no-longer-extricable traditions, habits and beliefs, and who think and feel and need and create, who, indeed, *must* create, who *must* paint, *must* compose, *must* write, that being their chemistry, that being their heritage, that being their drive, a drive that is universal from Auckland to Cardiff, from Osaka to Botswana, and without which such institutions as theatres, museums, galleries, libraries and concert-halls would be as thin on the ground as they are in the Kalahari Desert, the Sahara or Death Valley. Further, in literature, a writer dedicated to his art writes as he must, all notions of mainstream be blowed. One needs glance but briefly at a Conrad, a Nabokov, or, today, a Kosinski or Praver Jhabvala to see that success may be won even when one comes from outside the indigenous establishment as well as from within it – at the same time contributing abundantly to it. Given the support his writing merits, if it is good, the ethnic writer

may yet perhaps, in time, be recognised, even when much-touted, much-promoted, but ultimately vacuous ones become lost to dust. So, the ethnic writer need not concern himself with centres and peripheries or with tributaries and mainstreams which are terms often used in this context. Let him rather create according to his own sights; let him write out of his own traditions, influences and legends. Let him follow no fads. Let Literature, Art (capital L, capital A) be his beacon. That stream that is Literature may in time broaden to accommodate him and his concerns, while from his narrower tributary, he may yet enter the stream's more vigorous flow, there to enter the nation's landscape and rewarding all who are open, receptive and sensitive enough to gain sustenance from it.

The promotion of ethnic writing, then, does not seek to serve parochial ends, but rather to facilitate the addition of other dimensions to Australian culture and to permit artists of different hues to freely realise the artistic potential innate within them. This does not, *ipso facto*, carry any implicit indictment of shortcomings in the culture that is available – unless the same could be held about all artistic activity; nor does it have anything to do with the cultural cringe, a catch-phrase perhaps apt in its day, but now so sorely abused. It merely affirms that cultures, like oceans towards which streams may run, can never be so wholly filled and changeless that more cannot be added.

The bogey of polarisation, however, remains. And however idealised may be one's view of multiculturalism's ultimate aims, one would have good reason for not being particularly enchanted by the present literary scene in the matter of wider recognition of the ethnic writer as an integral part of the literary landscape. It is disturbing that some of the more recent anthologies of Australian writing are rather thin in their inclusion of ethnic writers, although there has been a certain redress in such volumes as Don Anderson's *Transgressions*, in *Outrider* which, with less self-consciousness than was previously the case, marvellously blends the indigenous with the ethnic, and in *Frictions: An Anthology of Fiction by Women*. It is a pity that the relative dearth of representation in Australian anthologies virtually necessitates the publication of separate collections made up largely, where not almost exclusively, of ethnic writers: Manfred Jurgensen's *Ethnic Australia*, Peter Skrzynecki's *Joseph's Coat*, Sneja Gunew's two volumes of *Displacements*, R.F. Holt's *The Strength of Tradition* and, more recently, *Neighbours*, which has ethnic writers and indigenous ones, the latter writing on ethnic themes, and Sneja Gunew again, this time with Jan Mahyuddin, coming out with *Beyond the Echo: Multicultural Women's Writing*, this last being an unabashedly, self-confessed work of positive discrimination, deliberately excluding Anglo-Celtic writers.

It is a pity, then, that these anthologies are necessary. One could be variously philosophical, fatalistic or disappointed about the fact. But, notwithstanding any of these responses, evoked particularly by the implication that editors of "mainstream" anthologies or journals are either unaware of the work of ethnic writers or deem what work they do know or that is submitted



as not worthy of publication, one would be right to deplore exclusion, on the one hand, and, on the other, to deplore token inclusion issuing from patronage and a deliberate suspension of critical integrity. The coin turned over, anthologies and journals that are positively discriminatory in favour of the ethnic writer to the deliberate exclusion of indigenous writers in the pursuit of their own politicised agenda are no more specially welcome. Neither the one nor the other is truly multicultural in its envisaged expression; neither merits the name, for genuine multiculturalism – to hearken back to what was said earlier – has no truck with any notions of “you” and “we”, or of “us” and “them”. Just as multiculturalism, in any equitable lexicon, does not exclude any ethnic, nor, conversely, does it exclude the Anglo-Celtic. True multiculturalism, at bottom, is *omniculturalism*. It embraces *all* groups. As criteria for selection of material to be published, say, or of recipients of grants, it spurns writers’ origins, there being only one yardstick eligible for use, namely, merit, first, second and third. Hence, to be multicultural – to be omnicultural – in its most open sense is to have works by indigenous and ethnic writers side by side in bookstores, between the covers of the same journals, in the same anthologies, and on the same curricula, all without self-consciousness, without tokenism, without condescension, even without a second thought. In this way, the critic’s fear of polarisation, which is not without justification of a sort, may be allayed, given a certain re-orientation and a broader mutual acceptance and melding of all, by all, for all.

This, then, is the multicultural end-point. The ideally and truly multicultural must be omnicultural. It cannot, of course, be more than this; but in the interests of the self-fulfilment and realisation of the creative gifts of all peoples in Australia (as of all peoples everywhere), none ought to settle for less. If multiculturalism/omniculturalism are to have an agenda for this last decade of the 20th century and beyond into the 21st, this would be it – this being a sentiment which I have every reason to believe Professor Jurgensen, a key and pioneering player in the wide-ranging literary integration of all writers, would share.

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