



MIGRANT WRITING IN AUSTRALIA.

Address delivered at the Opening of the Australian Book Week, May 12-19th, at Stauffacher's English Bookshop, Berne, Switzerland.

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One of the most moving moments of my present tour through several countries took place in Los Angeles, America. The day was the day preceding Easter Sunday; the venue was the Hollywood Bowl; the occasion was the rehearsal of the Easter Sunday dawn service to be held the following day; and the music that was being rehearsed was the Brahms "Requiem".

Now, it was neither the religiosity of the day for which the choir was preparing; nor directly the vaulting splendour of the music; nor even the much-vaunted but most-genuinely-deserved renown of the venue that moved me, though each may have played a contributory part in sensitising me to the loveliness of it. Rather was it something to me more wondrous and exalting still than any of these: namely, the presence in that choir of white and black and Hispanic and others I may not have been able to identify, both men and women ranging from adolescence to senior citizenship, who, in warming good-natured and concerted unison blended voices towards a single common end - the perfect and harmonious rendering of a

sublimely exquisite work expressing<sup>S</sup><sub>A</sub> the substance of their faith, even though that faith, let me here declare, was not my own.

And in a way, I had a vision then, or rather two visions - a more general grander one of the basic by-all-, by-everyone-possessed humanity and humanness that, given the right circumstances - the will, for example, the forbearance, the charity, and each man's own inner private peace as an ineluctable prerequisite - could some day augur in an era of genuine universal peace; and a lesser but more specific vision, a more practical and, I believe, more attainable one to which I shall in due course return.

But I give here a broad hint of it when I make reference to your own country of Switzerland, when I refer to the peace that appears - certainly to an outsider like myself - to exist within your borders, when I refer also to the order, the calm, the bonhomie and to the equal rights and freedoms and support given to each of your ethnic groups and cultures and languages, whether they be German, French, Italian or Retoromansch in origin and influence.

How does all this relate to my theme of Migrant Writing in Australia?

Let me begin by saying that Australia, like many other countries this century, has periodically opened its doors to immigration.

Although originally settled and colonised in 1788 by the English who, among other things, were in search of a remote trans-oceanic place to deposit their criminals, the country already in its first century - and particularly in the wake and aftermath of the gold-rushes of the 1850s and ensuing prosperity and opportunity - drew Scandinavians, Poles, Chinese, Frenchmen, Hungarians, Italians, Jews, from whose midst some illustrious names arose: Lhotsky, Srztrelecki, nov Guerard, Baron von Mueller, Monasch and Levi, among a wealth of others. As an aside,, I find it repeatedly sobering to reflect that while the mother of one of Australia's most gifted and acclaimed literary sons, Henry Lawson, was an Englishwoman, his father was a Norwegian sailor named Larsen who had jumped ship in Australia.

Notwithstanding that a considerable number of Europeans and Asians came to Australia, the country remained strogly and stolidly Anglo-Celtic in character, in orientatation and allegiance, and failed to give much freedom to, let alone acceptance of, minority cultures. The thrust of nineteenth-Century Australian society, as also of a goodly part of twentieth-Century society, was to have the newcomers assimilate quickly and leave their separate cultures, particularities and predilections back home.

Tom Shapcott, in a paper published in "Writing in Multicultural Australia", suggests two reasons for this.

First, the evolution of a distinctive Australian culture and literature required an assertive and simplified vision of the country and lines of development within the country. Subtlety, therefore, and fine nuance, whether of feeling, of observation of relationships, or of the social interplay of power and political control, were left largely in abeyance while the nation's first writers sorted out and defined what had been learned in their shock encounter with the land, with survival and endurance, and  
\* renegotiating old attitudes (that is, their inherited English attitudes) in a harsh environment. To these were later added certain qualities of on-goingness and commonality: the mateship legend, the myth of Gallipoli and a larrikin vigour that was egalitarian and supportive. Against this background, most non-English-speaking settlers were also facing parallel problems of cultural dislocation, but where these settlers wrote, their writings remained either unpublished or locked into tiny ghettos.

The second reason why the dominant culture has, until very recently, failed to recognise or appreciate the contribution of its non-English language migrants, writes Tom Shapcott, has to do with the nature and responses of second-generation settlers. As a general rule, second-generation migrants find themselves in a difficult cultural situation. At home, they share the culture of their family, through talk, through family legend, and through memory, both individual and collective. In literature, this was in many English-language works translated into narratives set ostensibly in

Australia, but with the use of language still firmly rooted in the soil of the abandoned English or Irish home. And that language with its repeated reference to Northern Hemisphere dales and dells and vales and valleys proved at sharp odds with, and totally out of place against, the tactile reality of an Australian landscape that, for all its pockets of near-sensuous appeal, was overall vastly harsher, drier, more arid, sunburnt and forbidding to any but the most tenacious wills. As a corollary - Tom Shapcott does not state this, but I suspect that the logic of the conclusion is inherent in his analysis -, as a corollary, the literary pioneers had to create their own language, their own forms, rhythms, imagery and linguistic colourations to master, through literature, the land - as also their lives - just as the pioneers who physically worked the earth and extended the pastures and created ever-new and spreading settlements mastered it with their brawn and sweat.

With regard to the second generation of the non-English-language migrants, they generally denied their own cultures and language and sought to be sometimes more stridently identified with the apparent local ambient culture than even their Anglo-Celtic neighbours. It is worth noting, however, that where such families have not been fully and irrevocably assimilated into the host culture and milieu, the third generation is not infrequently drawn back to rediscover its past and its abandoned culture, heritage and mores, not to mention, on another plane of things, religious observance with a renewed intensity.

In short, then - and at the risk of some oversimplification -, the elements that emerge from the study of the earlier history of Australian literature are the overpowering dominance, influence and pervasiveness of English culture in its parent and now no longer applicable form; the clinging of the first generation to its own culture, language and mores and, with exceptions, its exclusion from the surrounding culture; the active embracing by the second generation of that which the wider Australian milieu has to offer; and, in some instances, a return of the third generation to its roots.

That which obtained earlier - that is, in the nineteenth and until recently into the twentieth century - does not now, however, apply with such clear-cut group delineations. Australia is changing remarkably. The peri- and post-World War 2 periods have seen massive influxes of people of a multitude of nations into Australia - Italians, Greeks, Jews, Balts, Germans, Poles, Hungarians, Turks, Ukrainians, Maltese, Vietnamese, etc - to the extent that some thirty to forty percent of the country's near-sixteen million inhabitants are first-generation immigrants or direct descendants of these. But what is no less remarkable is the fact that for the first time, various non-English groups are aware that their vision of the country is as important as the dominant vision, that what they bring with them is a greater reservoir of consciousness ready to be tapped and a way of seeing that is not only valid but important. To quote

• Tom Shapcott:

"We are, in our culture, at a stage where a particular richness of...perception is occurring. For the first time, we have it within our capacity to perceive a much richer heritage from the past - our own multicultural past - because we have a much richer present in which different cultures are learning to express their particular response - and to share it."

So much for the historical, social and demographic background - however sketchy - against which Australian writing has evolved. The question to be asked at this juncture is how the various trends and attitudes outlined have been reflected in the actual making of Australian literature vis-a-vis the migrant.

To elucidate this, I turn to the paper of another student in the field, Janis Wilton, Research Fellow in Multicultural Studies at Armidale College of Advanced Education in New South Wales. Her paper, too, appeared in "Writing in Multicultural Australia".

In the phase where Anglo-Celtic literature was dominant and where it touched upon the migrant, two aspects stood out most clearly: first, the migrant as stereotype, and, second, the desirability of assimilation of the migrant into the host milieu.

As far back as the mid-to-late-nineteenth century, peoples such as the Jews and Chinese were subjected to stereotyped images, though one could with some truth argue that such representations were the expression of frank and crude xenophobia and racism that accompanied the growing nationalism at the time.

Where migrants were later rendered more seriously as subjects in their own right in writings shorn of their nationalistic overtones, they could still not wholly escape their depiction as exotic, eccentric characters peripheral to the explorations of identity, personal development, or the Australian way of life which were the traditional themes of so much that came to be revered as Australian literature.

For example, in Eve Langley's "The Pea-Pickers", published in 1984, Italians possess the popular image of being hot-blooded lovers, although it is an image they don't fulfil in practice, while they are also at different times described as being counted by the narrator "as primitives, children, animals or deaf-mutes", as being able to sing beautifully, and as having their presence in the worker-camps indicated by "those bright shirts fluttering from the line, those blue, red and green socks, velvet pants, striped underpants and calico berets...and a heap of spaghetti cartons."

The country town in Ronald McKie's "The Mango Tree" has a German



and a Chinese community. The Germans, to quote from the text, "were tall, heavy men with creased necks from too much sun and fair moustaches waxed at the end to pencil points". They were archetypal peasants and, as peasants, what else could they bring in return for help and favours but food? They were strong, sturdy citizens. The Chinese, by contrast, were both to the Germans and to most older Australians Chinamen, or Chinees, or Chinks, or Chows, and decidedly inferior. At school, the Chinese were fair game for sport:

"Chow [Hing] was a dark Cantonese...He had perfect teeth and hair as coarse as pig bristle...He had violent moods...If teased, he would twist the nearest arm he could grab and had to be prised off his victim before the arm broke."

These are but two instances - the German as sturdy worker, the Chinese as potentially violent and neurotic - of many that could be offered to indicate the stilted images and glimpses of the different worlds in which the migrant moved, these providing a focus for displays of Australian attitudes and prejudices. There is little subtlety in such works, little exploration of the complexities of being, thinking, feeling and experiencing that is the truer lot of the migrant as it must be of every man alive. These complexities were in time to be better dealt with by migrant writers themselves when they came unto their own.

In the meantime, however, side by side with the stereotype, is that other aspect already referred to: that of assimilation of the migrant.

Perhaps the best-known migrant figure in Australian literature is Nino Culotta in John O'Grady's "They're a Weird Mob", published in 1957. In contrast to the southern Italians whom he describes as small dark people with black hair and what are considered to be bad habits, Nino is a Piedmontese, a Northerner who are big fair people with blue eyes and good habits. But, for Nino, even these northern Italians cannot compete with the perceived superior offerings of Australia, and he enters that superior society by marriage to an Australian girl, in time coming proudly to discard any contacts with his own origins. With this Australian girl, he has a son and he finds himself thinking of young Nino and how fortunate he is to have been born in Australia.

"Probably," he says, "he [Nino] will never learn to speak Italian. Probably I will forget it myself, and will have difficulty conversing with my parents when we go visit them."

Rather than being cause for concern or regret, this loss of North Italian culture is something which he celebrates, and Nino Culotta, as John O'Grady's alias, urges others to follow his example, and he goes on later to write:

"There are far too many New Australians in this country who are still mentally living in their homeland, who mix with people of their own nationality, and even try to persuade Australians to adopt their customs and manners. Cut it out. There's no better way of life in the world than that in Australia."

That this is not an isolated episode is indicated by another work, that of Iris Milutinovic's "Talk English, Carn't Ya?" (1978). Here, writing in the name of her migrant husband, she puts these words into his mouth:

"At first I think it is too different and I cannot live here and my country where I was born is much better, but now I know this is not true. Australia is the best country in the world, and I am an Australian with an Australian wife and a fine brick home and some money in the bank."

The situation is changing. As Tom Shapcott said, and I repeat it here, "We are, in our culture, at a stage where a particular richness of...perception is occurring." That richness is the issue of what has come to be called "multiculturalism", in short, the advent, through migration, into the land of the many diverse nationalities and cultures which I listed before and the recognition, at least officially, of their validity, intrinsic merit

and contributory value to Australian life and culture at large.

With this increasing acceptance of the migrant as a person in his own right, he has in a sense been liberated. First, he is more free through his writing both to write as he will and to be listened to and heard. And second, though a number of migrant writers do express gladness and gratitude at living in Australia - after all, many have been refugees from war and political oppression elsewhere and have found in Australia a securer haven -, yet are they no longer obliged to sing the praises of the country. Rather, they can speak of dissidence and dissatisfaction, of uprootedness and homesickness, of hardship and cultural denial; and they speak as individuals with complex and tangled experiences which cannot be neatly squeezed into a ready-made mould labelled "the migrant".

So we find, for example, Yiddish writers like Pinchas Goldhar and Herz Bergner, both come to Australia from Poland, exploring the tensions encountered by European Jews in 1930s' and 1940s' Australia; and Mena Abdullah and Ray Mathew who, in the sixties, poignantly highlighted the cultural richness and confusions of a young Indian girl growing up in an isolated country region; and David Martin, Judah Waten, Maria Lewitt, Rosa Capiello, Vasso Kalamaras, and myself among others, who have sought to individualise migrants as credible flesh-blood-and-bone characters, whether Italian, Jewish, Greek, Turkish, Aboriginal, and so on, and depict

them as being more than those simplistic and assimilationist Nino Culotta-type caricatures. May I here mention a few others who have in recent years emerged with novels, short story and poetry collections and autobiographical works, writers such as the Italian Lino Concas, Mariano Coreno, Joe Abiuso, Pino Bosi and Charles D'Aprano, the Greeks, whether of the first or second generation, Dimitris Tsaloumas, the best-known and most highly regarded of them, Antigone Kefala, Zeny Giles, Angelo Loukakis and Spiro Zavos, the Maltese Joe Abela, Dutch Lolo Houbein, German Manfred Jurgensen and Walter Adamson, Austrian Josef Vondra, and the enigmatic Yugoslav Sreten Bozic who, under the name and persona of Banumbir Wongar, has dealt almost exclusively with Aboriginal characters and themes - even these names being but a sampling of an ever-growing number of migrant writers.

Interestingly, a curious inversion has been taking place. Where, before, it was the migrant who was more pervasively portrayed as being odd and having out of place habits, it is the Australian-born who in some of the works issuing from these writers are seen as peculiar. To Cecile Kunrathy, Australia is a barren upside-down place where

"the swan is black, the ants are white; you buy plants and flowers in the hardware store; cigarettes from the barber; glassware, watches and ice-creams from the newsagent; and at the furniture shop they sell costume

jewellery, toys and lots of other things."

To Pino Bosi, Australia is Druid country, timeless, sterile and unmoving, while in a passage taken from my own work - from the story "Two Years in Exile" contained in my "On Firmer Shores" -, the story that is most closely autobiographical of all my stories, I describe my mother:

"Of all misfortunes available to the children of this earth, she bemoans, Melbourne was the one she had to choose. Melbourne, a tail torn from the rump of the world, where she is lost, amongst neighbours generations, continents, galaxies apart from herself, a foreigner Jew in an Australian marsh. Like satin in tweed, perfume in tar, crystal in clay.

"'A wilderness we have come to,' she says. 'What a wilderness this is.'"

So do Australia and the Australian-born emerge as an odd place and an odd people, while the Australian way of life, whatever that might be, is not revered above all else. Nino Culotta may be proud that his son will not speak Italian and will become a good little Aussie, but the alternative migrant image regrets the passing of old worlds and desperately tries to capture and enshrine them. It is the old world that is revered, not the new. Gone is Nino's effortless

(too effortless) transition from foreigner to Australian; gone the image of the migrant's lot as an easy one in which material wealth and social acceptance can be plucked off the streets. Instead, the bitterness, the alienation, homesickness and prejudice, and the destructive emotional, social, psychological and spiritual dislocation are the experiences that resound more potently, as also the search for identity in the new world and meaning and self-realisation on the periphery of mainstream Australian society.

It is recognised that the wider acceptance of migrant writing is still at an early stage. Writers such as Judah Waten, David Martin and, now, Dimitris Tsaloumas have been well accepted into the canon of Australian writing; others among us are gradually making our way into it. Janis Wilton, on whom I have relied greatly in presenting this survey, is sanguine about the likely effectiveness of migrant writing entering the mainstream of Australian literature. For all that has been written about migrants in non-stereotypic ways, yet does she hold that the pervasiveness and tenacity of the Nino Culotta stereotype still needs to be challenged, and that publishers, literateurs, literary critics, the reading public, and even writers themselves are still a long way from accepting readily that the complexity of the migrant experience demands more than simple stereotypes whether of the migrant presence in Australian writing or of Australian writers from migrant backgrounds.

I tend to be more optimistic. Recent years have seen an increase

in the number of outlets for migrant - or, more broadly, multicultural - writing. For a time, there existed a regular journal entitled SCOPP, published by the Saturday Centre which continued actively for some nine or ten issues before one of the editors died, the venture being carried on for a while longer by his wife and co-editor Patricia Laird. This was a most credible and honest attempt at encouraging migrant writing and to have such work published both in English and in their native languages.

A similar approach - that is, publication in English and native languages - has been taken by Dezs<sup>e</sup>ry Publications in Adelaide, a publishing enterprise launched in 1975 by Andrew Dezsery, a Hungarian by birth who has contributed much to migrant writing, and some two years ago had his work officially recognised through the bestowing upon him an Order of Australia honour. Alongside his own work, he has published among others the work of Joe Abiuso, the Yugoslav Vlada Mancic, Leonid Trett, and a multi-lingual volume, an anthology of migrant writings entitled "English and Other than English".

Another publishing house, particularly geared towards bringing multicultural work to schools, is the Hodja Co-operative in Melbourne which has published and disseminated books and a wide range of educational multi-lingual aids to schools.

But one more publisher merits especial notice and that is Phoenix



Publications, situated in Brisbane and run by Manfred Jurgensen, himself a poet, novelist, editor, essayist, scholar and Professor of German, who has brought out quality works of prose and poetry by a number of writers, his rationale in selecting a manuscript for publication being that it must have sound and enduring intrinsic artistic merit, lest by offering something inferior, the credibility of migrant writing at large would be grievously devalued. And this rationale is the mainstay of the journal which, under the auspices of the Australia Council Literature Board, he edits with a team of corresponding editors from other Australian States, the journal being a twice-yearly publication called "Outrider", and created specifically for the publication of original prose, poetry, literary essays, reviews and some art work that impinge in some way on multicultural literature in Australia today.

What this publication - and Phoenix Publications, and Dezserly Publications to an extent, and such other journals as "inprint" and "Meanjin" which have also given voice to migrant writers - what these publications would seek to do, even if it has not been verbally spelled out, is to add a further dimension to Australian literature. While it would appear, at first glance, that these may be peripheral to so-called mainstream Australian writing, I, for one, see them in their sum as constituting a tributary, one which will, in time, and in tandem with the evolving changes in Australian society at large, as it were, enter that mainstream, thereby enabling migrant authors to contribute through their own traditions,

their own perceptions and their own experiences, what is in them to contribute.

In addition, it would be most remiss of me not to refer to the official assistance given to migrant - and Aboriginal - writers by the Australia Council Literature Board, which is itself government-funded. The Board offers writing grants and fellowships to authors of non-Anglo-Celtic origin towards the writing of works both in English and non-English; it offers publishing subsidies to enable books to be published, once again whether these books are in English or not; it offers subsidies for translations of work; and has granted incentive funds such as subsidies for multicultural conferences and, as mentioned earlier in passing, to journals such as "Outrider" in addition to the other mainstream journals.

As a result, I see in all this an enhanced enrichment of Australian life and culture, a broadening in range, and a deepening of content, insight, artistic elaboration and probing. These, I believe, are the fruit of pluralism, the issue of diversity; and if I may here speak for myself, I treasure pluralism, I value diversity, whether of language, artistic expression, ethnicity, religious beliefs or philosophies, so long as - I must here add - harmony and not strife between them emerge from their contiguous existence. Which explains in part why I value what I see here in Switzerland, the co-existence of four cultures and four languages which are given

their rights and freedom and support. Which explains, too, why I was so moved by the rehearsal in Los Angeles for the Easter Sunday service at the sight of those folk stemming from such different ethnic, racial and historic origins singing the Brahmas "Requiem" in a unison of voice and a unison of spirit. And which further explains the wellsprings of those visions I entertained then: first, the possibility, even if it seem messianic, of universal peace; and sceond, that lesser but more accessible one at which I hinted at the outset by my reference to Switzerland as a model of sorts - that Australia might yet become a truly multicultural, conceivably multilingual, cosmopolitan nation where each man, whatever his origins, whatever the melody he carries in his being, will find his place, contribute his share and enhance the whole.

Granted that we are, in this, ~~still~~ at an early stage of development. But at least a sound credible start has been made. Works by migrants are being written, published and read. Bit by bit, the ethos of the country is being changed, and, I believe, being changed for the better. In this, I share the enthusiasm of Tom Shapcott whom I used extensively in the earlier part of this address. And I can do little better than once again give to him the final word, with which I wholly concur.

"The distinguished poet and novelist David Malouf said recently that he believed the next two decades would see the real flowering of the non-Anglo cultures and their effect on

Australian creativity. I agree with him. And I note in current writing projects a remarkable broadening of the possible base for cultural exchange and discussion. The early assertive and simplified vision of ourselves is no longer relevant or necessary. As Anton Ehrenzweig [author of "The Psychoanalysis of Artistic Vision and Hearing"] said, it might be in the course of a few generations that what is happening here and now in our culture becomes fully absorbed and digested (and remodelled). But even from within the centre, the sense of activity and almost limitless possibilities is something quite new, and exciting, in our culture."

May 1987