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The Writer's Investment in Language

> 'What we have is what we are
> But what we are is not what we were.'
>
> I want to say a few things about the way language - words, and perhaps the pauses between words - operates for writers, some writers.

Before rushing in to my two favourite quotes about the 'role of the writer', I find I have to begin with another quotation that has haunted me since I first read it sometime in the 1970s. It is from Anthony Burgess' provocative book on Shakespeare:

> ..the people of Tudor England, like the modern Irish, were great talkers. One imagines their speech as rapid, bubbling, both earthily exact and carelessly malapropistic. It was perhaps a McLuhanesque medium, itself its own message and it exhibited the essential function of language - to maintain social contact in the dark.... Speech, when you come to think of it, is not a very exact medium: it is full of stumblings and apologies for not finding the right word; it has to be helped out with animal grunts and the gestures which, one is convinced, represent man's primal mode of communication. Take speech as a flickering auditory candle, and the mere act of maintaining its light becomes enough. Tales, gossip, riddles, word-play pass the time in the dark, and out of these - not out of the need to recount facts or state a case - springs literature.

The 'literature' I am writing about, therefore, is not the literature of explication, though its very core is the need to explain. It is not the literature of rational discourse, though the 'myself and thyself' built into the word 'discourse' is central, and the rational construct of language is a prize and a joy as well as a trap.

Perhaps what I (and, I think, Anthony Burgess) negotiate here is not so much a celebration of inexactness as a recognition of some basic human need for bonding that transcends whatever physical gesture is proffered. If we can never be exact, our very inexactness is understandable and perhaps even eloquent. It is certainly part of the human condition.

To put it another way: even in the manipulated world of late twentieth century admass culture, where McLuhan's message has become simply manipulation, there remains the original need and the original urgency. The English composer Sir Michael Tippett put it elegantly, though he was writing about music (an even more abstract medium):

> Behind the mass demand for entertainment lies somewhere the desire for the true abundance: to drink at the perpetual fountain of proportion and exuberance.

It is because of this complex but completely and essentially human need for 'communication' that both Anais Nin and Grace Paley, describing the specific task of writers, pinpoint the process as central to the expression:

> 'Write what you don't know about what you know.' Grace Paley
> 'The role of the writer is not to say what we can all say, but what we are unable to say.' Anais Nin

The writer has the difficult Janus role of being both interpreter and re-interpreter.

It is because of the nature of this difficulty that the educationalists' queries about the changing nature of literacy; or the ramifications of illiteracy; or the future's uncertainty and threat as against the past's regimen, all concern the writer (as they do), but from within a quite distinct framework of reference. The writer uses the available tools (including the language, ideas, idioms and even ironies of the past) in order to reach the indefinable, the 'what you don't know'. In other words, the writer is somehow projecting this process of getting 'it' down into the future, despite the irony that the getting 'it' down by its very act creates the past.

The past is available compost, in other words. But as Goethe said, 'That which you inherit from your fathers, you must earn in order to possess'. We must earn not only 'what we can all say' (in order to possess it viably) but 'what we are unable to say'.

Perhaps, having said all this to stress the point that writers do come towards the language question from a very specific angle, I could pick up some aspects of the contemporary issues raised in Sir Michael Tippett's point earlier.

As I put it, 'What we have is what we are, but what we are is not what we were'. Tippett adds a telling clarification and extension of Goethe's point about the nature of process:

> There is no question in our day of the artist receiving a true mandate from society to create. The mandate of society is to entertain, and that mandate is clear and uncomplicated. But the mandate of the artist's own nature...is to reach down into the depths of the human psyche and bring forth the tremendous images of things to come. These images are not yet art. It takes a lifetime's work to mould them into works of art.

If that sounds like a typical case of Artist Ego at work, I should point out that Tippett places this within a crucial context of process which (though still primarily referring to music) has been powerfully reinforced throughout our century. He quotes from a text by Anton Ehrenzweig,

> It is a familiar fact that new art matures into a mellow historical style in the course of a few generations, and that music which at first seems to have no harmonic sound yields later the qualities it had apparently lacked. This gradual transformation is not due to a belated understanding on the part of the public, but to certain dynamic changes in its perception which project more and more articulate order into the original half articulate structure created by the artist.

We don't have to look far even in our own culture to see the demonstration of this process. It explains to some extent the one-time negative responses of Professors A.D. Hope and Leonie Kramer to the work of Patrick White (and the way in which White's subsequent apotheosis can be used by the very same critics to hatchet younger writers). It also convincingly explains the risk-taking nature of writing 'what you don't know about what you know' and the retrospective articulation of 'order' onto that experiment.

In an era like our own, the fag-end of momentous upheavals and experiments, it also perhaps explains why the explainers and theoreticians become the village deciders - or would like to be. One sees the retrospective imposition of 'form'. I am sure Haydn and Mozart picked up the sonata form as something more useful and flexible than simple *a b a* structures, and Beethoven ran with it till it almost bled to death. The later theory teachers were the ones who 'projected order'. Similarly I can't help feeling more recent deconstructionists are looking for skeletons or perhaps the molecular construction of bones rather than the jumping, racketing, uncomfortable animals the artists and writers in this century have ridden as nightstallions and dreammares.

I don't see the essential question as relating to 'elitism' versus 'populism'. In many ways that, to most writers who are natural powerbirds, is more an issue of claims and boundaries - or claimants and boundary-makers.

In our culture the word 'popular' has long had the connotation of 'commercial exploitation' rather than any signification of spontaneous folk-reverencing. It has only been after the stagnation of the post-Rock era that a longtime vital contemporary 'popular culture' turned retrospective and became as obsessed with past icons as any formalist tradition. The 1960s and 1970s revival of the poet-composer as performer was the great creative plateau of so-called 'popular culture' in our time. Even academic anthologists of poetry now include Bob Dylan in their hierarchies. For writers, Norman Hampson's observation that 'Poetry is concerned with the ever-present, not the immediate', still holds.

In our own culture I feel privileged to have been living through a period of creativity and energy. I would also have to concede that it has been a period of timidity, takeover and tentativeness.

The statistics tell some of the story. In writing, as recently as the 1970s there were only a handful of novelists getting published here, and that included the obligatory tokenism towards young subsidised talent. By the 1990s, despite the recession, we have grown so accustomed to high-performance, high-profile Australian writers that we automatically seek out their work in the bookshops. A whole industry of writers' festivals has evolved, in all States, playing to packed houses. Every third week the *Good Weekend* or its equivalent, has a major profile of a mid-career Australian writer. More importantly, to me, has been the emergence of young and new writers in the 1990s: their work suggests not only promise, but challenge and range. The first novels of Gillian Mears, Heather Grace, Sue Woolfe and Matthew Condon are certainly more impressive and skilled than, say, were the first novels of Thomas Keneally, Rodney Hall and Thea Astley. Marion Halligan, Nigel Krauth, Tim Winton and Garry Disher are already accepted as part of the 'establishment' though they are all part of a 1980s crop.

What I am slapping down is a card-pack representing creativity, energy, accomplishment, all of it recent and all of it more than confirming the 'Australian Renaissance' which hit international attention a decade or so back: David Malouf, Helen Garner, Rodney Hall, Robert Drewe, Kate Grenville, Peter Carey. We do need to be reminded of how these stack up.

One way of noting that is to compare them, as a group or as part of a cultural emergence, with overseas contemporaries, or with their own predecessors. In the one case, their capacity to attract translation and international publication more than compares with, say, their equivalent Canadian contemporaries. In the other case, setting aside

the historical development of earlier writers (getting back to some sense of the 'original half articulate structure') the level of performance of the more recent generation is undoubtedly more spectacular than the earlier works of most of their predecessors. What is more important: the level of expectation is now not some narrow alluvial valley, but is a high plateau with sweet grasses and long views.

I've all but said my piece. I would like to add, though, that among more recent developments in our writing, the rapid articulation of an Aboriginal written 'voice' has been impressive. Techniques of 'oral history' and concern for cadence have fed into an increasing recognition that to 'get it down' is to activate political consciousness. Heaven help Aboriginal writers who get entangled with recent French theories of irrelevance. Aboriginal writing is going through a period of construction and purpose, it is looking forward, not, like the deconstructionists, back. The nature and scope of published Aboriginal writing has widened greatly in something under a decade, and it will not be set back by tricksters and hoaxers. If one looks at the development, say, of Black writing in the United States, this is a remarkable indication of a new literacy we had to have, and are being expanded by. Australian writers in this field have done in a handful of years what took their American predecessors thirty or forty years to arrive at - a language and a cadence that is distinctive, authentic, and communicable. We have, again, been made to listen.

There have been moves towards the cultivation of migrant languages other than English. Their most fertile area of creative potential may well be the ways in which Australian-written English takes on board something of the oral modifications (or would you still say 'distortions'?) of migrant English.

Television is in many ways a conservative medium, endlessly recycling 'accepted' cliches. The remarkable change in the language of television commercials from imitation-English and imitation-Yank to Ocker, in the later 1970s, had as much to do with the way already broad Australian speech was influenced by migrant imitation of heard sounds, as to any nationalistic reclaim. Whitlam 'buying back the farm'. John Singleton and Paul Hogan maybe made the breakthrough in their acceptance of a heard language, but that heard language had been modified by migrant recycling - just listen to any newsreel footage from the mid 1940s and you will hear the difference. One of the nice things about Australian television is that it confirms Pierre Juneau's wish that: 'It should be possible to turn on one's television set and at least know what country one is in'.

What we are is certainly what we have, and holding on to it involves also discarding parts and taking up others, or at least the recognition of what we have been part of all the time - or what has become part of us. To have something is to be able to recognise it, even in the dark. And what we have is what we talk about, instinctively, in the dark with only that tallow Tudor candle Anthony Burgess dug out for us. I'm listening. As a writer, that's my job. And by listening, we learn what we know. This whole essay has been an attempt to 'learn by going where I have to go' (in Theodore Roethke's phrase) and to follow Grace Paley's dictum: 'Write what you don't know about what you know'.

Thomas Shapcott holds the inaugural Chair in Creative Writing at the University of Adelaide. This article is reprinted from David Myer's The Great Literary Debate: English in contemporary Australia *Melbourne, Australian Scholarly Publishing 1992.*

NOTES

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