

Elsewhere: On Not Being Home—Creativity as Expatriation

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We had come to Kalymnos to seek a source, or a wonder, or a sign, to be reassured in our humanity. Charmian Clift, *Mermaid Singing*

So here we are, alive in this mythical place, not Kalymnos, the first island on which Charmian Clift and George Johnston lived in the Aegean, but Hydra, that many-headed monster that wooed and seduced and repelled and wounded so many. ‘Oh, Leonard Cohen’s house is just up the road. You must go and see it,’ someone said to me. ‘There are old people still alive who knew the Johnstons,’ said someone else. I read recently a newspaper article about the death of that famous Cohen muse, Marianne Ihlen, and the story was accompanied by a black and white photograph of Cohen playing a guitar, a woman with her eyes closed resting up against him. ‘Cohen with his girlfriend Marianne when they lived on Hydra in the early ‘60s,’ reads the caption, except it’s not his blond Norwegian girlfriend Marianne Ihlen with her eyes closed, a rapturous expression on her face, but Australian writer Charmian Clift.

There are myths and rumours and mistakes everywhere to be had—and that’s not even including the rights and wrongs of the gossip of the people of this island. I know a Greek Australian—who was just plain old ‘Greek’ during the time of this story—who left his village of Richea on the Peloponnese in the months before the Second World War. His father had died during the earlier Greco-Turkish war, his family was starving, and he was 11 years old and expected to be the man of the family since he was the only boy amid five girls. He boarded a train at a bigger village than his own, a village it took him a whole day to walk to, then a train to Piraeus, where he worked as a cabin boy until some vicious act of which he still cannot speak hastened his departure. He fled to Hydra, and when the ferry sailed into harbour it was a pink dusk. ‘All my happiness came back,’ he said. His sadness fled, his grief at leaving his mother, his home, everything he had known. The port of Hydra was his home for the next two years, as a deck hand and all round go-to boy, before he eventually made his way to other islands, then back to Piraeus and—finally—to distant family in outback Queensland. How strange, how exotic, the small Australian town of Childers was to him, as strange and exotic as Hydra is to Australians. He was outside language, beached among rituals and signs and a body language he did not recognise. Forever after his dreams were filled with the shape of the bare hills of Richea and the image of a pink dusk, a port, the tinkling of bells, his body inhabiting happiness.

Is my old friend a migrant? Is he a refugee? Is he an expatriate? Or is it only middle-class folk who can be called expatriates? Nationality is one of the most powerful ideological fictions we have invented for ourselves, a way of confirming who we are by declaring, ‘I am not that,’ as much as saying ‘I am this.’ Expatriation—for writers especially—has become a means of living out a double vision. Writers do not only live once, but twice, in memory certainly, like everyone else, but more particularly in the act of processing experience. Charmian Clift was especially deft in this: her experience became a letter, which became a story, which became a book, *Peel Me a Lotus* (1959). And here we are, you might say revisiting her Aegean island experience once again, safe among the tide of peoples dispossessed from their homes in Syria, Iran, Iraq and elsewhere, washing up here—both literally and metaphorically—only a few islands to the east.

A decade ago I wrote about my own decision to seek a second passport, a process which changed my status with regard to my identity as both an ‘Australian’ and an ‘expatriate’ (‘Write of passage’). And what seemed like a complex equation then has only become more so, as we are now here, Brexited, with everything we thought we knew about that old Europe so painstakingly pieced back together after the catastrophe of the Second World War, breaking apart again.

So many, seeking passports! So many, seeking safety, a better life—seeking, like Clift, deliverance. But what does a passport mean to Clift or to me, a safe, well-fed, middle-class Australian writer, whose English is not poor and indeed whose very livelihood depends on the English language? I am not stateless or dispossessed and yet, unlike Clift, I sought out another passport not mine by birthright. I was not in search of safety obviously, since I had a perfectly safe life at home. And, more significantly, I already had a perfectly good Australian passport. So why did I seek a British one? I am Australian, from ‘Godzone,’ the ‘best’ country on earth, the land of ease and safety to which Greek men such as my friend gratefully fled and embraced. Margaret Atwood once said that the beginning of Canadian cultural nationalism was not ‘Am I really that oppressed?’ but, ‘Am I really that boring?’ Now Canada and Australia might be said to share many things— among them a sensitivity to American cultural imperialism and a fear that we might be boring. Is it true that cultural expatriation for Australia’s artists and writers and opera directors and composers and dancers is no longer necessary because, unlike the 1950s, Australia is no longer boring? That the world has shrunk, globalisation ensuring that every main street in every city is the same, with Starbucks, Virgin, Apple, everywhere indistinguishable? There’s a school of thought suggesting that artists are now *obliged* to stay in Australia, a cruel inversion of the Cultural Cringe, implying that it’s now morally suspect to wish to leave.

And yet no writer, no matter how minor, can fail to be aware of the long tradition of writers who have left their countries, and who continue to leave. England’s David Mitchell lived a long time in Japan and now lives in Ireland; America’s Diane Johnson has lived for many years in France; England’s Tim Parks in Italy, and of course there are many other contemporary examples. In the twentieth century it was a rite of passage to leave—James Joyce to Italy; Americans Henry James and T.S. Eliot and Joseph Conrad to England, as did South Africa’s Doris Lessing. Katherine Mansfield and Christina Stead were everywhere but home—France, America, and England. D.H. Lawrence went to Mexico, W.H. Auden to America, and Christopher Isherwood, Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald—and practically every major American writer of the twentieth century—to France. A number of them, including Edith Wharton, died there. In Australia in the 1930s and ‘40s, virtually an entire generation of artists and writers left the country—from Stead to Sidney Nolan, and a little later, Clift and George Johnston. Voluntary exile for these artists and writers of every nationality brought a certain vivacity to the life of memory, and for the writers, a particular freedom to observe other worlds not their own. Exile from their country of origin also gave most of them another, deeper strand in their complicated relationships with those countries. James Baldwin lived in Paris for most of his adult life and wrote about America: ‘I love America more than any other country in the world, and, exactly for this reason, I insist on the right to criticise her perpetually’ (9).

Other expatriated writers such as D.H. Lawrence, Mario Vargas Llosa and, famously, Australia’s own Nobel Laureate Patrick White, were fuelled not by love but by rage towards their homelands, a passion bordering on hatred. Lawrence loathed England: ‘Why, why, why was I born an Englishman? My cursed, rotten-boned, pappy-hearted countrymen. Why was I sent to them?’ (422). Vargas Llosa has spoken of his relationship with Peru in romantic, even

erotic terms, as if bound to it in hopeless love. His relationship is a 'constant torment' to him, 'more adulterous than conjugal, full of suspicion, passion and rages.' Vargas Llosa lived in Europe and other South American countries, hating his spurned country as much as he loved it:

Sometimes I hate Peru but I know that even though I hate it I need that country. I felt like that when I was in Europe. I knew that if I didn't return to Peru I would be finished. Unlike some other writers . . . I am stimulated by Peru, even with all its problems.

And yet Vargas Llosa is also against any form of nationalism and is vociferous in his championing of a borderless world. In a speech in support of globalisation he declared that any notion of 'collective identity' is positively dangerous. Now, he said, 'citizens are not always obligated, as in the past and in many places in the present, to respect an identity that is imposed on them through the language, nation, church, and customs of the place where they were born.' In this sense, to change your country because of nothing more than desire is an act of individual human liberty.

Like Vargas Llosa, Patrick White also left his country for many years, but felt drawn to return. White lived out the rest of his days—some four decades—in Australia. And in his celebrated essay, 'The Prodigal Son,' written in 1958 when he was 46, White admitted that even the boredom and frustration he experienced in Australia presented avenues for endless exploration.

As Australian writers of the twenty-first century, we are presumed to be free to choose to be either 'here' or 'there,' and we are presumed to be free of the cultural cringe. Australian writers and poets such as Tim Winton, Kate Grenville, Joan London, Charlotte Wood, Les Murray and Richard Flanagan—and many others—produce works intrinsically bound to the politics, geography and physicality of Australia, and it is impossible to imagine them elsewhere, even though Grenville spent many years in Europe and much of her early work was set there. And yet artists are still leaving. Among the million Australians currently living elsewhere in the world, a number of poets, writers and film-makers are among them, including Peter Carey, Luke Davies, Janette Turner Hospital, Peter Conrad, Geraldine Brooks, Meaghan Delahunt, Phillip Noyce and—for about 20 years, on and off—myself.

Of course, writers and artists are also arriving in Australia, most notably Australia's newest Nobel Laureate, J.M. Coetzee. Who knows exactly what Coetzee's motivation was to move from South Africa to Australia, although an educated guess might suppose that it had more to do with the social and political circumstances of a struggling South Africa, as well as with private matters of the heart. But it might concern, too, a kind of waking up which some writers need to do. I remember when living in London—where I lived for ten years, eventually moving back to Australia only after living not only in London but also in France, Boston and Hong Kong—I asked my ten-year-old son what it was about the land of his birth he loved so much. 'I feel more awake in Australia,' he said. He was no poet, but he already knew the difference between feeling awake and feeling asleep.

It struck me then that 'feeling awake' almost exactly described my experience of creative expatriation—that is, it was the sensation for which I searched during all those long years away. When I stepped outside my door I wanted most to feel a kind of stirring. I yearned for rich detail, exhilaration, surprise, something to wake me up. It is life's longing for its best self, its fullest wonder, the feeling of being fully awake. I'm never more awake than when I am 'on the hoof,' and of course my failings as a person and as a writer are the same—a willingness to fall

towards sensation, impression, fleeting subjective passion. As with most writers, I absorb the world through my senses and emotions, and like Patrick White—and this may be the only way I am like Patrick White!—‘I don’t set myself up as an intellectual. What drives me is sensual, emotive, instinctive’ (*Flaws* 81). Writers live most deeply in their intuitive lives, often expressed in actual physical solitude in rooms away from colleagues and offices. Writers are observers and in being removed from the familiar, the observing muscle is forced to work twice as hard. The memory muscle is forced to run—indeed everything that a writer is, the watcher on the cast iron balcony, the vivisectioning eye—emerges into its fullest force. Expatriation then becomes a match between the internal and external selves.

Some time ago, I read an article about Tennessee Williams in which some of his letters were quoted. In one he wrote to a friend about the difficulties he was having in discovering within himself a new vein of material: ‘All artists who work from the inside out, have all the same problem: they cannot make sudden, arbitrary changes of matter and treatment until the inner man is ripe for it’ (‘Kiss of Life’). You might say for writers like me—and for writers such as Charmian Clift—the question then becomes: What do I see when I open my eyes? What do I hear, feel, experience? For the expatriate writer the experience of existence comes as a series of Jamesean ‘moments.’ In his memoir *A Small Boy and Others*, Henry James writes of wandering around New York, hoarding impressions: ‘For there was the very pattern and measure of all he was to demand: just to be somewhere—almost anywhere would do—and somehow receive an impression or an accession, feel a relation or a vibration’ (17). But, of course, just anywhere would not do. Anywhere for many writers (including the adult James) had to be somewhere else, somewhere beyond. Beyond the known, the reach of safety, of the expected, and especially, beyond the reach of familial expectation. Being elsewhere brings the illusion of escape.

And let’s not forget that other spur to expatriation: money. I stand before you, a writer who has tried to live by her art for almost 30 years, and pretty much succeeded. But when the literary industry shrank—publisher’s lists, advances, Amazon, the full catastrophe—I went back to working full-time as a journalist for seven years, rising at 5am every morning in order to write. Money is the elephant at the party. We all know that the value of art, its true value, is not always measurable in the same way as the other things society measures and values, and money is the reason artists and writers are increasingly being pushed to the margins. When I lived in London there was a growing movement of artists taking up squatting as a means of survival. One of the movement’s founders spoke of art being able to exist ‘in its own context, without the primary aim of commodifying its output. Squatting is a necessity for an artist trying to find ways to work without commercial constraints’ (Hoby).

For a writer such as myself who sees my fiction as my life’s work, I have willingly sacrificed much financial security to be able to keep writing. This means I have hardly any superannuation and the only possible retirement I face in Australia without relying on social housing is to buy a house in Childers, say, that small Australian town in outback Queensland which my Greek-Australian friend once found as strange and exotic as Hydra. A modest house in a faraway Australian country town is the only sort of place I can afford to buy outright without a mortgage. As life was for Charmian Clift in the 1950s, so is the life of the Australian writer of today.

For the moment, however, I’m currently living on the Ionian island of Kythera—not so far away from Hydra—having once again left journalism. I’m trying Greek life on for size, deciding if I might have enough to buy a little house, and if I might eke out a modest life for myself if an Australian age pension proves portable. Not on Hydra because it’s now too expensive. My

British passport is no longer a passport to the EU but, even so, I am one of the lucky ones—I have two passports, two eyes, two selves, the experiencing self and the processing self, still looking beyond.

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