

In Search of Self and Australia in the Habsburg Café

On a lovely January afternoon in Sydney, while sipping tea in the ornately decorated lobby of the Mitchell Library, I was introduced by a mutual friend to a rather short balding man with a stern look and an undefinable fire in his eyes: he was Andrew Riemer, who like the rest of us crowd attended the New South Wales Writers' conference in 1995. I immediately recognized him as the author of my recently purchased book discussed here, *The Habsburg Café* (1993), a travelogue recounting his voyage through some of the countries of Central Europe, Austria and Hungary, the area to which, as regards its habits, food, architecture and the like, also belongs my native country Slovenia. This is why it probably caught my attention on the bookshelf, for I was most curious to see the former countries of the Habsburg and the later Austro-Hungarian monarchy through the eyes of both an *outsider* and an *insider* to the region, the fine observation of a Hungarian-born, migrant Australian author, Andrew Riemer.

The Habsburg Café follows and practically toes the line of Riemer's first memoiristic travel book *Life Between Two Worlds: Inside-Outside* (1992), which represents an attempt to come to terms with the author's migrant roots. Also his very recently published third book, a somewhat less enthusiastically received travelogue *America with Subtitles* (1995), belongs to this group of autobiographical books. In 1998 Riemer published his most recent book titled *Sandstone Gothic: Confessions of an Accidental Academic* in which he discusses his long academic career, almost exclusively spent at Sydney University which he left early because of the arrival of "Theory", to retire and to engage more fully in

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writing and reviewing. This book, too, is concerned with expatriation, which "is emblematic of Riemer's situation" (McCooney 7):

Indeed, in this work he seems less sanguine than in *Inside Outside* or *The Habsburg Café* about the apparently postmodern condition of his narrative, with its emphasis on parody and surfaces. The insider on the outside, or the outsider on the inside, is not a position gained without costs. While mimicry is a way of controlling the object of attention (English culture in an antipodean context, or a remembrance of Middle Europe) it also, Riemer seems to say, has real effects upon the psyche (McCooney 7).

Andrew Riemer was born in Budapest in 1936. In 1947, travelling via the U.S.A., he settled with his parents in Sydney, where he now lives with his family. At first he became an expert in French-knitting, a skill acquired when, unable to speak English in a new Australian environment, he was put in a class for intellectually handicapped children. And then, as if he, a migrant, wanted to prove just the contrary, his study and professional career paradoxically led him eventually to become the teacher of English literature at the University of Sydney, from which he recently retired to become a free-lance writer and a regular contributor of book reviews to the *Sydney Morning Herald*, *Australian Book Review* and the *Age* in Melbourne.

In all the three of his travel books he is (re)visiting his past, trying to come to terms with his double, "schizoid" identity, and to reconstruct the past from shreds of his own memory and family myth. His first book *Life Between Two Worlds: Indside-Outside* published in 1991 recounts the experience of his return to the city of his birth, Budapest, in 1990, to the chaotic world awakening then from totalitarian rule. This autobiographical work was well

received by critics and readers alike, which has not been entirely the case with his very recent travel book *America with Subtitles* published in 1995, for some critics have, unkindly, suggested that he has simply written the same book three times over again. Although there is indeed much structural repetition in the three books he wrote, I would contend that his second book discussed here, *The Habsburg Café* from 1993, possibly shows him at his literary best: it captures the spirit of Central Europe in a most unobtrusive and metaphorically suggestive way.

It is true that in all his books Riemer obsessively, narcissistically even, tries to portray himself: he seeks to recover his partial Central European identity and by contrast also define his (new) Australian identity. It is obvious that certain Australian critics do not or do not wish to fully understand the spirit of Central Europe and the literary sensitivity of its writers, saying about his work, in a most generalizing way that "migrant writers rarely escape being comedians, even when they are not being intentionally funny" (Juers 11). Also, it is wrong to say that his books appeal to and are intended particularly for a European-Australian readership, "with whom he shares the experience of migration and those keen cultural insights with which outsiders are gifted" (Juers 11).

Riemer's books could only tentatively be called "migrant novels", but even then only in the best sense of the word, for they can be better described as "factional" autobiographies disguised as travelogues. They do, in fact, appeal to the Australian readers of Hungarian as well as non-Hungarian origin, because they are never exclusive in treating the migrant, European subject-matter; rather, they try to attune Australian readers' ear to the finest sounds and shades of meaning of Central Europe, rendering it susceptible to the specific cultural issues and *esprit* of Central Europe. What's more, in trying to transcend his "ethnicity" the author explicitly points out in *Life Between Two Worlds: Inside-Outside* that the term multicultural in Australia, both to describe society as well as its

literature, may entail some sort of marginalisation, for "preserving an "ethnic" identity, in the manner implied by the propagandists of multiculturalism, may also be tantamount to cultural and social isolation" (Ballyn 289). In the book he comes to gradually realize, upon his first visit to his home town Budapest after many years, that he is after all a foreigner to these people:

I had nothing in common with this world, I came to realise as the initial impact of return began to wear off. This was not my life; it had almost no bearing on what I was or felt myself to be. I began to be acutely aware of the advantages of my real life. Sydney, with its sprawling suburbs, its harsh, all-revealing light, seemed a blessed place compared with the murk and grime of this depressing city.... I got confused about the elaborate rituals governing café-life: who served, whom to pay, how to tip, and when to leave. I realised that I desperately wanted to go home (Hergenhan and Petersson 180-81).

Andrew Riemer's family inheritance is not an easy inheritance, it is one of a persecuted Jewish family, who fleeing the totalitarian regime, decided to seek new life elsewhere, despite its organic connection with Central European world, Budapest and Vienna alike. The relative avoidance of addressing his Jewishness, some critics even complained that he cannot spell the word "Jewish", sheds another significant light on his identity search. He is throughout the book culturally aloof with regard to Central Europe as well as to Australia and as a result experiences some sort of identity crisis. This may position also his stance towards the (Helen) Darville/Demidenko affair, where he defends the author of the three times awarded book *The Hand that Signed the Paper*. In his book-length study *The Demidenko Debate* he sees Darville's book as a limited but a definite literary achievement, relying purely

on conventional procedures rather than on the "ethnicity" disqualifications of the author who signed herself as Demidenko in order to draw the ethnicity (Ukrainian) card, as some critics believe (cf. Stewart 72-79). Riemer's autobiographic and partly memoiristic books are, despite their at times melancholic and nostalgic vein, so visual and "real" in a cinematic sense that, as regards *The Habsburg Café*, one is readily reminded of the Hungarian film about the staging of a Wagner's opera, namely Isztvan Szabo's film *Meeting Venus* (1991), which takes place in Paris and in Budapest at roughly the same time as Riemer's voyage and is explicitly Central European in expression.

In Riemer's *The Habsburg Café* various exquisitely prepared and sophisticated foods, the opera and the cafés are the main settings as well as the three major clusters of metaphors standing for Central European life and culture. Looking at his travelogues from the Structuralist point of view, it could be said that they represent a kind of "cultural translation", since two sign systems collide (or are superimposed) in them, on the level of the signifier and the other on the level of the signified. Each of them is through these metaphors saying something different to either a Central European reader (such as myself) or to a non-Central European (Australian) reader.

The Habsburg Café is a palindrome, like the author's life itself, which can be as any palindrome "read" in the same way forward or backward. It traces the return of the native and describes above all the author's spiritual repatriation "in this palindromic year" (10). The circular framework of the book, which practically does not include fiction proper, is represented by the arrival and eventually the departure flight at Vienna International Airport. The motto to the book sets the mood and is very telling in evoking Robert Musil's novel *The Man Without Qualities*, which was attempted to recreate "the good old days when there was still such a place as Imperial Austria... that vanished Kakania"!

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The introductory chapters describe the present-day moment of Central Europe, the heartland of the former Habsburg and the latter Austro-Hungarian Empire, which in the author's view still partly lives steeped in the past, in the mythical nostalgia and imitation of the imperial pomp and grandeur, although many of its myths have already been turned upside down. It would be wrong to look for any kind of clear political analysis and evaluation in the book, for it describes the Central European spirit and its culture indirectly, by superimposing the images of Vienna and Budapest in the author's recollections of the actual, the imagined and the expected. Undoubtedly can the book serve as a rich source of historical data about the period and the countries travelled in. However, it does too, in my view, grow beyond the sheer documentary reportage book, for it describes the experience of repatriation of any returning migrant (even if only for a short visit) could have, his/her experience of the gulf between the remembrance of things past in an 'imagined' country and things present in a new, adopted country. Part of the book's intrinsic artistic merit is also its occasional fictionality and a suggestive rather than conclusive narrative.

Riemer very fittingly uses the known label of "Kakania" when referring to the Austro-Hungarian Empire in the closing decades of the empire, when its grandeur slowly crumbled away into the Great War:

Kakania sounds romantic, an ancient duchy or quaint principality, one of those long vanished territories of fiefdoms that came at length to be absorbed into the Austro-Hungarian Empire, yet was still remembered fondly. It was, however, cobbled out of a familiar bureaucratic abbreviation, 'k.k.', standing for the phrase '*kaiserlich und königlich*' (imperial and royal), which was used to denote the dual nature of this world... the fiction of the dual monarchy which, by virtue of

those two 'k's, sounds like *kaka*, that is to say, ordure, faeces or manure (10).

He stresses the multicultural value of this realm, for people moved easily among its various linguistic and ethnic divisions. Despite the apparent, naive safety, stability and benevolence of this world, the author still nowadays sees it as touchingly fragile, then only too easily blown away by the gunshot assassination in Sarajevo. Riemer draws a parallel (in brackets) with the war reverberating (in 1991) first in my home country Slovenia, then Croatia and eventually in Bosnia:

(None of us knows at this time that in less than a year Sarajevo itself will once again stand as a symbol of the hatred and enmities which have always disfigured this part of the world (11).)

The author is aware that by returning to Central Europe it will not be the Central Europe of 1946 he will find there and that his (double) identity could be tested in an embarrassing way. Paradoxically, he is in search there also of Australia and his identity as an Australian, for he was invited to take part in a most "odd, even eccentric enterprise", which is, however, "appropriate", i.e. to give a course of lectures on Australian literature and culture various Hungarian universities to young people, who have "only the haziest notions of that distant, exotic and, for them, probably outlandish place" (6).

A tenuous link still exists, therefore, with the place where I know, more or less, who I am, for I have lived in Australia long enough to make it possible to call myself an Australian. It is true that this identity may have been assumed or invented, yet it is an identity of sorts (7).

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Riemer's book describes Central Europe, largely a country of the mind, fashioned out of nostalgia and fantasy. It is the land of his heart's desire he often finds longing for in Australia, "that place at the other end of the world I now know as my home" (8). He both builds and deconstructs the popular myths and auto- and heterostereotypes of the Austro-Hungarian world through the muddled collection of images and metaphors which are couched in his imagination: sights, sounds, smells, social rituals and music. Three clusters of metaphors, the insignia of this world, are used to this end: foods, the opera and the cafés. He literally revels in the description of rich pastries, towering gâteaux, mounds of chestnut purée surrounded by snowy peaks of whipped cream, sandwiches shimmering under films of aspic, saying that "modern Austria obviously seeks to display its individuality, its charm and appeal in terms of the richest yet most delicate of foods" (15). It is fascinating how real the writer manages to render these delicacies; indirectly he thus tells a great deal about that society in the near past, the mores and the mentality of the people, for example their abhorrence of becoming *déclassé*, their striving to create a *niche* for themselves in that rigidly stratified society, where upward movement was practically impossible.

Eating, and by no means only *Strudel*, *Mozartkugeln*, *Sachertorte* or *Wiener Schnitzel* was and, according to the author's acute sense of observation and penetrating socio-cultural analysis, to a certain extent still is a proper social rite. Food was in the Austro-Hungarian world the focus of communal life, adulated and intimately connected with the elaborate social structures. The fact remains that from the sociological point of view the family circle, a Freudian feudal-bourgeois kind of a family, was the centre of social life, where, of course, the quality as well as the quantity of food represented a powerful social metaphor, reflecting all the diversity of the Austro-Hungarian world, from Viennese custard slices, *pâté*

in aspic, richly fragrant ham from Prague, spicy salami from the Hungarian plains, to the baroque sandwiches laden with slices of meat, eggs, caviar and cheeses.

Five-o'clock tea, a curious and copious meal, usually consisted of goose-liver pâté sandwiches, quivering custard slices and that confection known as *Indianer*, made of two chocolate-glazed hemispheres of sponge held together with stiffly whipped cream - the magnified images of which are floating across the screen in front of me. These were the ritual trappings of a ceremony fundamentally important to the maintenance and preservation of a cherished way of life (16).

For Riemer the actual building of the Viennese Opera House is of lesser importance compared to its metaphorical representation of the dreams and social aspirations of a sentimentalised past. Opera houses are placed in the strategically central points of those European cities where political power wanted to express itself also through art. The author is right in asserting that the more absolutist the regime, the more prominent places these "secular shrines" occupied in the city. The opera house in Vienna is described by him as the symbol of reconciliation between political absolutism and the people, to create an illusion that the monarchy was built not on subjection and domination but on the willing submission of the people.

The Central European mania for the opera reflected a social ritual with its individual conventions and characteristic codes. To attend the opera was a mark of cultivation and indicated one's place in the complex hierarchy of feudal-bourgeois society. At the opera the social hierarchy came to its utmost expression: everybody sat in that part of the building to which one's status entitled one, with subtle social gradations, from the royal box down. The author of the book shrewdly observes the opera-goers at the performance of

La Bohème, trying to find shreds of the imperial past in their manners and code of behaviour. He comes to a revealing conclusion: he had often thought in his "antipodean exile" that the Central European society is a place where arts are really valued, where audiences are well-informed and well-mannered. However, he is greatly disappointed observing the audience and listening to their uninterested chatting; one of the Habsburg myths is thus being destroyed in front of his very eyes. Central Europe's famed respect for culture is to him merely a lie, "one of the instances of dishonesty that have marred the political and social life of this part of the world" (71). If there is at the beginning of the book an occasional sense of nostalgia for the Central European imperial past, then it is almost completely dispelled by the end of the narrative.

The author's descriptions of the image of Australia and Australiana in Central Europe are likewise very suggestive. He describes, for example, a garden party at the Australian Ambassador's residence, trying to raise money and help with the forging of Australo-Hungarian friendship, which meets there occasionally "in a basement rumpus room decorated with posters of Bondi Beach and the outback" (130). He finds, quite rightly so, that Australia is very "chic" in the Central Europe of the early nineties, for tourist agencies in the elegant streets of Vienna feature seductive posters of Ayers Rock, koalas and the dreamy images of the Sydney Opera House. Despite the spirit of the place Riemer feels relatively strongly attached to in Budapest, he all along remains in a much more intimate relationship with Sydney, a city he knows far better, a city where he feels "much more safe, comfortable and at ease" (141).

The author, in search of his Australian identity, detached and in exile in Budapest, the second site on his Proustian journey through Central Europe and his childhood years spent there, draws constant parallels with Australia. A phoney neo-Gothic brick

cathedral in Budapest, for example, immediately recalls him of some of the "stone extravaganzas" of Australia, which the Australians, in his view, regard as living signs of Australia's colonial status, "of that cultural cringe that worshipped and attempted to emulate the institutions of a distant and arrogant world" (144). He points out that even in Europe, similarly nostalgic examples of *trompe d'oeil* are to be found and, indeed, come as a surprise, for not everything is genuine in Europe either. The author is increasingly aware of the gulf he finds between the Hungarians and the Australians. Not knowing which part of his split identity to resort to and to fully endorse, he swerves again and again. Despite all sympathy and the sense of identification with Australia, he culturally feels closer to Hungary.

... I am always conscious of being outside the emotional currents of Australian society. ... For me the Australian landscape, a source of deep consolation for many, is always hostile and threatening (148).

Andrew Riemer's travelogue *The Habsburg Café* continues by visiting a row of different cafés in Vienna and in Hungary, each of which has its own story to tell about the people frequenting them and the world in which it is set. Thus, most unobtrusively, the reader is (mis)guided by this major all-embracing metaphor of the book which on the one hand represents the tradition and order of the Austro-Hungarian past, while on the other it illuminates Riemer's experience of a new, troubled and perplexing post-Cold War and pre-Euro age in Central Europe. He is in a temporary exile from Australia and finds this world and his own identity emerge, metaphorically and literally, from the rich aroma of freshly roasted coffee at the emblematic and ambivalent "Habsburg Café", be it in Vienna, Budapest or Szeged, the town in the very South of Hungary:

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... I am convinced, it must emerge from a private vocabulary of images and memories. It is a visual and olfactory emblem of the lost fantasy-world of Kakania: the characteristic appearance of its streets in some city or town, mixed with a whiff of its equally characteristic and perhaps most significant institution - a café where the sweet odour of vanilla mingles with the pungent scent of highly roasted coffee. In my imagination, this cafe of the Habsburg world - in some unknown city or town of my early childhood when that Empire and realm, though no longer a political reality, still exerted an influence throughout its former territories - has assumed a position of undisputed centrality. It has become a distillation, a compact, fleeting yet powerful image of a world irrecoverably lost, a world compromised by hatred and brutality, ... and yet a world of irresistible allure (19).

For the author café-life is the drug addiction, the staple of Central European life. It involves much more than mere eating or the consumption of coffee, because in it conversation and social relationships are made to work, where some sort of "social harmony" emerges, comparable to the one the rulers of the former Kakania wanted to achieve among their often unruly subjects: the Hungarians, Austrians, Czechs, Slovenes, Jews, Catholics, Protestants, gentry and bourgeoisie alike. The last café, the last extended metaphor of the mythic Kakanian world Riemer visits in his travel account *The Habsburg Café* is located in Vienna. Its description ends the book very much to the point, as the fossil of the Dual Monarchy, the bitter-sweet, seriously-comic operatic dreamworld of Kakania. However, to the author this is not an *operetta*-like world; this world is still very real and embedded in the past, its traditions and culture, that he himself is part of.

In Hungary things past start to grow on the author and his Australian identity: his fears prior to departure were, after all,

perhaps not entirely unfounded. The result of this Andrew Riemer's "national identity" crisis and culture test during his visit to Central Europe, which involves shock as well as painful and pleasant recollections, has materialized in a fine travel book *The Habsburg Café*. It reflects the images of his own and of the romantic past that are still alive both in Vienna and Budapest, in the period of the recent major socio-political change in Hungary, as seen from the perspective of a Hungarian-born Australian traveller, social analyst and, above all, writer.

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