

## PART TWO: POETRY



## Australian Poets in and about Europe since the 1960s

During my last study stay in Australia in 1994 I got hold of two handsome newly published books of poems that caught my attention as a European scholar doing research “down under”. These two books discussed here are: *On the Move: Australian Poets in Europe* (1992), edited by Geoff Page, and *Changing Places: Australian Writers in Europe* (1994), edited by Laurie Hergenhan and Irmaud Petersson. They have attracted some criticism in Australia, but hardly so in Europe, where the poems are set. It seems to be our task, of us European literary critics, to amend this, which this paper sets out to do.

Australians are generally considered good travellers; to the extent that they sometimes travel even more than they can afford, one may add tongue-in-cheek. The good attendance of Australian writers and scholars at EASA conferences in Europe is just another case in point. But quite seriously, the fact remains that Europeans, and not solely so, get to know about Australia and Australians and their propensity to travel, like it or not, through the popular TV travel series, for example those put together by Clive James, probably the best known Australian traveller with literary aspirations and a “bi-focal vision” of an expatriate writer (cf. Bennett 1988), although he does pose as “an innocent abroad”, a rather stereotyped naive and unsophisticated Australian; or, for that matter, the Lonely Planet travel broadcasts for the more adventurous ones, along with their much circulated Lonely Planet Publications (Hawthorn, Vic.). Is travel, therefore, inherent in the Australian mind and culture? Is it the offshoot of the (post)colonial condition? Could it perhaps be that the Aboriginal concept of home,

which, due to the hostile desert climate, is to leave home, one's own place of origin, i.e. to travel, tends to dynamism rather than stability in the general Australian view of Home?

Life as a journey, as travel, generally represents one of the central metaphors in Western-European culture and literature. Its consequent expatriation expresses the elementary topological split between departure and arrival and, often, a return from the target destination back to the place called Home. In the eyes of Australian *literati* Home has for a long time (and for some still continues to be) co-existed together with expatriation. Suffice it to think about scores of Australian writers who even nowadays divide their lives and work between Australia and Europe. Europe in particular has been the travel target, for Australia has, at least originally, been settled mostly by European nations whose descendants and cultural heirs are trying to discover their "roots". Only recently with the more pronounced Australasian connection, Asia seems to be getting into focus. As Werner Senn has suggested, Australian poems on European paintings constitute a significant textual body, which is not sufficiently recognized, for they coincide with the "rediscovery" of Europe and its culture after the consolidation of an Australian national identity through the Great War (Senn 84).

A traveller as an outsider is a detached observer of foreign lands and its people who, during his journey, paradoxically, often learns more about himself than about the land explored. Physical journey in Australian literature, as it is known, frequently represents spiritual search and Australian (and many other) literary travelogues and travel books in a sense all have a common denominator: namely a journey abroad always begins - at home, in one's own mind. This is not a tautological statement, since by travelling abroad one is always travelling home, into one's own psyche. All the best "literary" travelogues thus contain at least some elements of psychological introspection. Travels result in transculturation, the formation of auto and heterostereotypes, they

undermine the established and preconceived stereotypes and myths, offer imagological diversity and, ultimately, also in the case of Australia, enable the forging of an Australian self-definition and identity - in literature.

The Indian poet Rabindranath Tagore wrote that one must travel and see the world only to be able to see and appreciate the beauty of home in a simple grass blade which grows right in front of one's own doorstep. Foreign lands and cultures therefore help us understand ourselves, and, by extension, one's nation and country, our identity. Is it, according to the famous British traveller Bruce Chatwin, that nomadic movement rather than settlement is a natural human state? Often does a traveller-poet set off on a journey with preconceived ideas about the target country and its culture. Modern interdisciplinary science called imagology discusses in travel literature such key terms as auto- and heterostereotypes, stereotypes one has about one's own country and culture and the way in which others see one. They jointly contribute towards the creation of a national character, a national stereotype as reflected in literature, or rather, as proves the case of Australian poets in Europe, its undermining and dismantlement, since the best of this poetry largely eschews stereotypes altogether. It could generally be said that literature is one of the major sources from which national stereotypes are derived, it is also through literature that they are perpetuated and literature, nonetheless, also helps to change and undermine them. They can, of course, be perceived in a positive as well as in a negative sense, i.e. as merely a preliminary generalization about the subject which invites more data to be added and learned about, or as a straightforward generalization that resists any revision.

Contemporary Australian poets have since the 1960s frequently travelled to Europe, the paramount *topos* and source of their inspiration abroad, as the result of a greater accessibility of jet travel in the 1960s and the "kangaroo route" to London. Since the

1960s the pilgrimage of the Grand Tour experience and the longer expatriatism, have been replaced by shorter visits and sheer touristic concerns. These travels are, as modern anthropology would have it, a form of initiation in modern societies, a rite of passage, from youth to maturity, of a poet, of an Australian. Traveller-poets, outsider observers of foreign lands and customs, in the process of transculturation which works both ways, affecting the translator and the translatee of an individual culture, learn more about their own identity than about the culture observed. The two books examined are *On the Move: Australian Poets in Europe* (1992, ed. by Geoff Page) and *Changing Places: Australian Writers in Europe* (1994, ed. by Laurie Hergenhan and Irmtraud Petersson) in which poetry only is analyzed. One of the first full-length anthologies dedicated to Australian travel literature (fiction) was *Australians Abroad: An Anthology* from 1967 and should definitely be mentioned in order to stress the continuity in the development of Australian travel literature. It features extracts from books and essays by major Australian writers and their experience of Europe in different historical periods, from Rolf Boldrewood and Henry Lawson, to Hal Porter and Alan Moorehead.

Many poems published in 1992 in the anthology *On the Move: Australian Poets in Europe* in 1992 have not been published in major books, collections or anthologies, partly because they are so very recent and because of their subject-matter. There are no less than 129 poems in the book, which shows just how much "travel poetry" has been over the years produced by Australian poets. They are thematically divided according to various geographical regions and are arranged in the form of a European travel itinerary (xii): The British Isles, France, Spain, Germany, Central Europe, Russia, Italy, and Greece. The three by far the most extensive sections are set or dedicated to the British Isles (including Scotland, Wales, Ireland) Italy and Greece. This speaks for itself, for they appear as the three most frequent targets of

Australian traveller-poets in Europe, at least as it results from this anthology.

What, then, are the motives of Australian poets rather than just (and/or also) tourists to travel to Europe? At least of few major ones could be identified from among scores of others, including, believe it or not, the pleasure of watching others at work while you yourself are on holiday, the view maintained by some theoreticians of tourism. Furthermore, there is the desire to research and get to know one's family origins (roots), a perfectly hedonistic wish to taste and enjoy the foods and charming landscapes one has so much heard about (even if this results only in the so-called "postcard poems"), and, according to the editor of the book Geoff Page, perhaps the most important of them all, a somewhat condescending conviction that an Australian education is still incomplete without a personal knowledge of at least the major cities and galleries of Europe (ix). This statement, which does perhaps not do entire justice to Australian (higher) education, would therefore signify that Australian poets perform the same travel ritual as was customary in 19th century on the "Grand Tours". This would especially refer to young people in Australia (and not only there), who deliberately postpone their study at the university or permanent employment until they have been on a rucksack tour of Europe. This is, I would contend, in an anthropological sense certainly connected with the earlier mentioned visible initiation rite of passage from youth to maturity, one of the few that modern societies have still retained. The cultural pilgrimage of a former, much longer Grand Tour has thus been since the 1960s replaced by jet travel and cut-price kangaroo lines by major world air companies and has thus changed the cultural landscape of Australia.

As can be seen from a number of the anthologized poems, traveller-poets are, however, also attracted by the possibility to get away from it all, to see, by contrast, their homeland, Australia,

from a distance and from a different perspective. And for the past two decades, in the 1970s and 1980s, it has generally become enough simply to travel or spend a considerable period of time in Europe, than actually to become a full-time expatriate, as was, for instance, the case with members of the older generation of writers, Peter Porter and Randolph Stow. In the poems there is a much visible gap the poets observe between their own and an individual European culture. Although all generalizations are some sort of falsification, the editor of the book even offers a definition of the Australian traveller-poet, "a somewhat androgynous observer, forever aware of his/her linguistic and/or cultural limitations, normally resistant to any romanticism, alert for ironies but by no means sealed off from experience" (xi).

The British Isles' section of the anthology opens very appropriately with David Malouf's poem "The Little Aeneid" (1-2), which represents the impetus to travel itself, in a beautifully sophisticated way alluding to classical antiquity, namely the making of an Australian poet, the speaker of the poem, himself a latter-day Aeneas, who should "set out then with all/ your little household demons/ stowed in a trunk" (1). It is surprising how many travel poems concentrate on the description of flights, planes, the sheer technicalities of a journey, e.g. "Night Flight" by Marion Alexopulous (3) or "Planes Landing" by Jamie Grant (4). Kate Llewellyn in her poem "London" (5) claims, contrary to Dr Johnson, that "it's not that men are tired of London/ London is now tired of men". She metaphorically compares the city with an old woman, tired and plain, one that had lost her charm and that wants "to talk only of the past/ her Empire that she dragged/ like a pink dance dress/ right around the world". The poet is an Australian postcolonial poet and is disappointed to find "the mighty heart" of the former Empire grown so old and seedy. R.F. Brissenden in "London Graffiti" (6) experiences the same sort of London decadence in toilette for gents just off Piccadilly Underground,

where he is shocked by the racist graffiti and the teenage drug-addicts punching heroin into their arms. Sometimes individual sights in England are just a backdrop and serve merely as a Proustian little madeleine cake to trigger off one or two personal associations with the poet's private life: e.g. in "Boveney Church" (12) or "Farewell At East Finchley" (13) by Vicki Raymond. Several Australian poets in Britain revisit famous ruins or birth places ("Wordsworth's House at Rydal" (15) by Mark O'Connor or "At Haworth" (16) by Anne Elder), with the ever doubting Peter Kocan asking himself on one such occasion, what this literary pilgrimage is all about: "So when I ask myself why I'm here,/ What makes the excitement of it all,/ The answer's that what I really feel/ Is the sly joy of being *nowhere* - /A stranger in a transient room". Robert Gray in "Scotland, Visitation" (20) constantly draws parallels, indulges in self-projection and works by contrast, the sky above Glasgow reminds him of Australia, Glasgow curiously appears to him as "a place dull as Brisbane".

Paris features as another European metropolis and cultural metropole ("Metro" by Jan Owen (26), and "Paris" by Kate Llewellyn (30)), where cultural prominence is often juxtaposed with the libertine French sexual mores, as in Barbara Giles's "Eve Rejects Apple" (31). Along with the French Brittany some Australian poets also pay a visit to the sites of the great battles of the Great War which was so instrumental in forging the Australian national identity and consciousness. David Campbell as a nostalgic Australian in the poem "The Somme" (38) describes the countryside along the Somme river "like the Monaro/ In a blond season", while Alan Gould in "Pozières" (39) contemplates the place where "the old world died". Germany and Austria invited a number of "occasional" Impressionist pieces to be written by Australian poets, e.g. Hal Colebatch's "One Tourist's Cologne" (46), Chris Wallace-Crabbe's "Losses and Recoveries" (48), while Isobel Robin in Vienna in the poem "Freud's Back-yard" (49)

discovers that “there’s no detritus here from dreadful dreams;/ the sanely waltzing Viennese/ have whipped it stiff and baked it in a torte”. Andrew Taylor speaks about “Kafka’s Prague” (54), Philip Salom about his terrifying plane-landing described in “Arrival at Ohrid” (66), to attend the famous poetry festival. Andrew Taylor meditates on a morning he had spent in Ljubljana in Slovenia, just before the independence war in 1991 (Maver 69-71). In the poem “Morning in Ljubljana” (68), my hometown, he had even back then prophetically announces the events that did actually take place in 1991, hearing “the beginning of silence/ after every third beat of the waltz/ and the faintest rumble/ of a Baroque square/ filling with tanks - somewhere/ somewhere, somewhere in the future...”

Italy is perhaps the most favourite target of Australian traveller-poets, especially the regions of Tuscany, Venice and the greater Rome area, which in his typical satirical vein was so wonderfully described by A.D. Hope in his long Byronesque poem “A Letter from Rome” back in the late fifties. Two poems in the anthology are set in the Lake Garda region, David Campbell’s “Sirmio” (76) and “Sparrows and Poems” (77). Rosemary Dobson, a renowned traveller-poet, in the poem “Tombs” (80) contrasts the ornate marble tombs and chapels of Florence with those she had seen in England, where “Daniel Defoe, John Bunyan and William Blake /are/ lying together,/ names not quite legible, stained with fallen leaves”. However, reminded of her own mortality, she addresses a question to Lorenzo the Magnificent in the Medici Chapel: in which town of the world would she herself, an avid traveller, come to suddenly find her own name on a gravestone? She writes he would probably do the following:

Probably he would lift his head a moment and/  
answer,  
“Does it matter?”

Philip Hodgins in "Hotel Minerva" (82) confesses to the hotel receptionist that he has contracted "an unbelievable disease", namely that he does not have to write travel poems any more, whereas Andrew Taylor ("Travelling to Gleis-Binario", XVI) finds himself at Piazza San Marco in Venice during high sea that eats Venice from below, seeing it for what it really is,

the crumbled marble, stucco falling like rain  
and salt chewing its way up through the brick  
toward that heaven that we Pisces gather to admire.

Another poem dedicated to Venice is a real literary gem. It was written by R.F. Brissenden and is titled "On the Zattere ai Gesuati" (84-85). The poem is an homage to the city of Venice, a hymn to its clean beauty in the limpid morning air after the rain, when the speaker imagines seeing it as Canaletto saw it. He does, however, not only praise its architectural and art treasures, but is suddenly reminded of his own mortality, too. The speaker and his companion announce that beautiful day is theirs for the taking and the metaphor of an ice-cream which will not melt fits in perfectly with the Venetian setting:

So let us sit and order our gelati  
Knowing that even if we eat them slowly  
They will not melt. Today  
Is ours - today we'll close our eyes...

The poet then imagines treading on the heels of Henry James and John Ruskin, realizing "that the stones of Venice/ Are sinking, slowly sinking," using an elaborately sophisticated maze of allusions, referring also to Andrew Marvell: "there'll be time/ For us to take the boat and cross the water". The boat can be taken in a literal sense, to cross the canal from the Zattere to the Guidecca or, in a metaphorical sense, to cross the river Styx to enter the Hades;

however, the poet feels Death has no place there yet, he can wait for them. He therefore proposes to have another bottle of wine, a kind of seize the day wine-tasting of the moment. It is the feeling of an immense freedom of the mind any visitor to the city on the lagoons can experience in some way or other. Venice enables the poet a kind of Yeatsian separation of the spirit and the body, the victory of the spiritual existence, represented by great art, over the bodily one, where the spirit and the past come alive in old Venetian palaces and churches, they float and linger in the air like the sound of Vivaldi's oboe he imagines hearing from the church of Santa Maria:

And in the small church of Santa Maria  
Del Giglio listen to Vivaldi's oboe  
Soar free above the strings  
And float forever.

The last poem in the anthology is John Forbes's "Europe: A Guide" (129-31), which was probably intended to round off the book, but does just the opposite; rather, it comes as a surprise. Short statements arranged in unrhymed couplets show just how provoking and somewhat too generalizing a traveller-poet may also be in his description of other peoples and cultures, even if his intention originally was to be satirical, funny, critical. In a kind of superior stance he, for example, says how "in Germany there's Kraftwerk/ & acres of expressionist kitsch", how "Denmark is neither vivid nor abrupt" or how "the Spaniards are not relaxed about sex/ & tourists are attracted to this". He thereby manages to construct largely negative heterostereotypes about individual European nations, thus fashioning the Australian mind. However, one must also look at it from the other angle, maybe it is precisely the outsider Australian poet that can really become detached, see things people do not see, and at least to some degree objective in

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describing the various nations, and just maybe he may say things the various nations would not want to hear? Maybe these lines are just a little bit too condescending:

Besides, if you remove the art, Europe's  
like the US, more or less a dead loss

& though convenient for walking  
& picturesque, like the top of a Caran  
D'Arche pencil case or a chocolate box,...

The second book under survey is *Changing Places: Australian Writers in Europe*, 1994, edited by Laurie Hergenhan and Irmtraud Petersson, who also wrote an extensive and well-referenced introduction. It embarks on a much more forbidding task, to try to present, not exhaustively, of course, the major Australian writings about Europe in verse and prose, fiction as well as non-fiction. It includes representations of encounters of various kinds, direct and indirect, with another land and culture, written in various genres and discourses - fiction, poetry, non-fiction, pieces of journalism, autobiography, interviews, guides, notebooks, etc. This essay, with a view to the proposed subject, focuses on poetry only, although travel (non)fiction constitutes the greater part of the book and sheds light on the perception of various European countries in the Australian literary imagination. Many of the (travel) poems that feature in the book could also be found in Geoff Page's anthology analyzed earlier. It is divided into four parts, which can be regarded as some sort of thematic clusters, although it would be difficult to speak about any kind of single theme in each of them: "Travellers, Tourists and Expatriates", "Trails and Trials: The Rituals and conventions of Travel", "Origins, Heritage, Pilgrimages", and "Out of the Cold: Testing Political Climates".

Vivian Smith's poem "The Traveller Returns" (91) strikes the reader as an instance of patriotic "Oziness" in the noblest sense of

the word, voicing the feelings of an Australian traveller upon returning home. He can now see Sydney with its "Pacific lick" in quite a different light, for he needed detachment in order to be able to appreciate things near, and every journey is, it is safe to say, in some way or other a journey home: "After slow cathedrals, pilgrim towns/ Sydney's violent sky can offer this/ moment that catches us still unprepared". Katherine Gallagher's poem "Plane-Journey Momentums" (127) harps on a different strain, echoing the deep-set and yet unexpressed fear of flying there is in almost every air passenger "trying to forget/ your innate strangeness to this absurd/ transitory life you've taken on - ". Andrew Taylor's poem "Folds in the Map" (129) is a fine combination of a travel (postcard) poem and an intimate examination of a relationship. The two cancelled what was left of the tour and they stay on in the Gasthaus "by a lake, with ducks, together." "The Journey with Children" (130) by Judith Rodriguez is likewise very personal, confessional almost, saying that now that she has children, she can no longer indulge for long periods in museums, now that "their eyes are your new museum of taste,/ young leaf in ancient gardens." But she is far from regretting it.

At least two of the poets presented in the book have had nightmarish "bad dreams" while abroad and wrote poems about it, Peter Porter and David Malouf. Peter Porter in his poem "Bad Dreams in Venice" (141) looks back somewhat nostalgically on his tourist trip to Venice with his wife years ago and again now after quite some time. On this second journey revisiting the city, the speaker's wife "mutters to him old harshnesses", them both having ambivalent feelings about each other, who "like Venice, loved but hated too". David Malouf in "Bad Dreams in Vienna" (207), "sweating in snowfields of white sheets" at Hotel Graben (which he symbolically sees as grave or ditch, as denoted by its name), in his dream relives the traumatic as well as glamorous historical events of the imperial city. He catalogues a number of instances from the

Viennese past that haunts his imagination, from the Turks *ante portas*, Strauss and Freud, Mozart, Hitler and the Great Pest, concluding accusingly that in Vienna “bad dreams have monuments”. In turn, Isobel Robin in her poem set in Vienna “Freud’s Backyard” (176) finds no remnant there from the dreadful dreams of Dr Freud’s patients, adding ironically that “the sanely waltzing Viennese/ have whipped it stiff and baked it in a torte”.

The section of the book titled “Origins, Heritage, Pilgrimages” brings most of the poems presented in the book, including some of the classic Australian (travel) poems such as, for example, A.D. Hope’s long poem “A Letter from Rome” (146-148), which represents his search for the European roots of Australian culture, complemented by a fine Chris Wallace-Crabbe poem “Flat Out in the Mezzogiorno” (149) dedicated to the great maestro, the “tailtwisting Alec”, A.D. Hope and his appreciation of Italy as the *fons et origo* of Western civilisation. Diane Fahey in “Sacred Conversations” (163) suggestively reinterprets Titian’s painting “St Mark Enthroned” in Venice, finding in him both Eros and Dionysus rather than Christ, establishing thus that in Venice the sacred is always very close to the profane. She speculates that Titian took for the model of Saint Sebastian a young sixteenth century gondolier, who looks on the painting so undressed and “happy to be gaining money for so little effort”, enjoying, she finds, of “being gazed at by each woman who enters/ the church....”

There are also quite a few multicultural authors represented, who wrote poems upon revisiting their home country or the country of their ancestors, e.g. Jan Owen, Manfred Jurgensen, Antigone Kefala. The Australian poet of Greek origin Dimitris Tsaloumas is most clear on this score, stating that heterostereotypes about Greece do not hold true, or about any country for that matter: he addresses the reader, urging him/her to come over to Europe “since you insist, but/ whatever you remember, now forget”. The Aboriginal voice is represented by Mudrooroo and the poem “Sugar

in London” (221). “Sugar” in the title refers to the London production of Jack Davis’ play *No Sugar*, where he feels “vacant of any reason for ever belonging here”. The last poem included, a fine example of a travel poem, is that of R.F. Brissenden, titled “Rock Climbers, Uluru, 1985” (145). It juxtaposes the two presences in contemporary Australia, the settler and the Aboriginal one, where the speaker of the poem claims he, too, has to have his dreaming and sacred sites, like the Aborigines have them; it is just that they are not in Australia, but in Europe, e.g. on the Acropolis in Athens, where he climbs like the ant-like rock climbers of Ayers Rock, Uluru, in the very heart of Australia.

First hour in Athens: jet-lagged, raw eyes watering  
In the gritty wind, I stood on the Acropolis  
And knew my dreaming. We didn’t climb Ayers Rock.  
Our sacred sites are elsewhere:...

However, spanning the two worlds, Europe and Australia, he concludes by stating that despite the European roots of Australian culture, the great Uluru rock is much older, the oldest of them all, a sacred site, where the genesis of the world took place, “where yesterday snake-man, goanna-man/ And wallaby-man emerged to make the world”.

The question put forward earlier, whether travel is inherent in the Australian mind and culture, of course, cannot really be answered, at least not in a single way, nor was this the objective of this essay. It is easy to agree with the view that in our jet age travel currently exists very much as writing or “text”, as well as, or as part of the “lived experience” (Hergenhan xiii). Travel writing, including travel poetry, has namely become part of a global, international context, just as tourism and travel phenomena themselves. Don Anderson’s piquant statement can be borrowed to the purpose, just as editors of *Changing Places* found it most

appropriate, too: "Travel is to the '90s as sex was to the 60s. Everyone claims to be doing it. Certainly, everyone is writing about it" (Anderson 46); and so do Australian poets. Of course, the reasons to travel are as many as there are authors in the two discussed books, which suggestively portray the Australian poetic sensibility at work in various European locations. However, they all seem to have one thing in common; to Australian poets the real country, Home, the spiritual rather than just the physical one, is their own mind (Peter Porter, qtd. in Hergenhan and Petersson xxxiv).

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