

# *Writing Country: Lightning, Agony, and Vertigo*

## The Barry Andrews Lecture

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What brought me to the subject of this essay was Granada Television's 'Seven Up' series (first broadcast 5 May 1964). Its Jesuitical premise was: 'Give me a child until the age of seven and I will give you the man.' That was its brief and its investigation, in, I might add, the language of the 'sixties. In many respects the program bore out that children were not preordained in life. But as each series moved forward in seven-year periods, the subjects held to some remarkably consistent personality traits which tended to justify the direction they took. I tend to ascribe this stamp or stigmata of personality as *style* in the case of writing. One is born with a certain style. It is a function of those first years that crystallise personality.

I've entitled this keynote essay 'Writing Country.' This can be taken to mean something either like 'writing the country,' or as the imaginative place which induces the material, the inspiration, the environment from which the creative act arises. I hope to take a third approach which, through a kind of negative capability, holds these two concepts in contradiction. But before that, let's have a look at 'country style.'

We have heard of Faulkner country, Carver country, the Border country of Cormac McCarthy, the southern cadences of summer wind in Eudora Welty's country. There is a marvellous diversity in the United States. Now I may be someone who specialised in American Literature, but I have the sneaking suspicion that a diverse, mellifluous prose style in the English language is something the British tradition, other than in its postcolonial legacy, looked down upon with suspicion, at least since the triumph of the ornate period of John Milton, Jeremy Taylor and Sir Thomas Browne. As Martin Amis said recently in an interview:

America is a much younger country and everyone subliminally understood that writers would play a part in defining what America was . . . But in England, with this matchless literature going back so far, an Englishman doesn't need to be told what he is . . . (n. pag.)

So in one sense, style as national self-reflection . . . and Martin Amis is a great stylist . . . is not much considered when shaping literary values in the British tradition. In contemporary times, it is left to foreigners and immigrants to deal in this area . . . and there are copious examples of them, from Salman Rushdie to Zadie Smith. Not that I think they form a movement; just that they provide a counter-text to the current widespread practice of plain style.

I think most serious writers are born into a kind of 'country' that formulates their styles through the reality of their experiences, but moreso through the circumstances of their birth. I am not making an argument for Nature versus Nurture, but I am saying that while one's childhood, one's familial circumstances, one's early experiences, are what matter in the way one responds to the world and to writing, there is also a predisposition to vulnerability and sensibility. One is born, for example, into the difficulty of sensibility. Often there is less of a distribution of literary talent where sense is involved. A writer seldom abandons painful

experiences for logical debate or argument. For example, from the first time a child encounters the idea of race, life has already changed forever in its illogicality. For the sensitive, the world is more puzzling and hurtful and the necessary adoption of logic and sense runs contrary to the effulgence of language, to the revenge of it against the law of the father. We know all this kind of thing from psycho-analytic theory so I won't go there right now.

What I would like to comment upon is that it seems to me a repression of style is what the tradition of English empiricism exploited, as though a stiff upper lip, a realist or naturalistic demeanour, a prejudice against form over content, an election of the writer as dry plot-maker, could somehow give reality more gravitas. Modes of knowing that belong to empirical science are increasingly monopolising the space of subjectivity where humanistic vulnerability and debate are seen as somehow disruptive, troublesome to the commodification of corporate power. This has become the crisis of our times. The great blindspot is that raising children in this blinkered atmosphere where expression gives way to repression, separates humanity from the human. As Julia Kristeva indicated, we are becoming subjects without souls.

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Australia, regarded for its independent-mindedness, has never had a revolution. The tough work of settlement forged a relation between utility, pragmatism and a plain style. The word 'soul' had never featured much in the national formation. Later on, the Ern Malley hoax nipped Modernism in the bud. Perhaps a driving empiricism destroyed the baroque, the excess, the waste and the risk in literature that was necessary for real diversity. Perhaps anti-intellectuality threw a wet blanket over experimentation, kept it to the safe and narrow, and innovation was only noticed when paradoxically there was an overseas success, seeking empathy for punching above its own weight. Maybe I am entirely wrong. I do, however, take my cue from George Steiner when he says that most of twentieth-century literature is 'extraterritorial,' a literature of exiles and refugees which injects the world into provincialism:

It seems proper that those who create art in a civilization of quasi-barbarism, which has made so many homeless, should themselves be poets unhoused and wanderers across language. Eccentric, aloof, nostalgic, deliberately untimely . . .  
(11)

The copious intake of refugees by Australia after the Second World War scarcely resulted in publishing many of these kinds of writers. Yet there were quite a number of them foundering in the anonymity of a foreign language, traumatised by war and living within the dominant discourse of assimilation. It was up to resident incumbents to represent these wasted lives, either masquerading as refugees and foreigners themselves or characterising them cruelly without their own voices. Patrick White bucked the status quo by incorporating critique with empathy, but prior to him there was little in the way of representing the complexity of the Other in Australian literature. White also had to defend himself against his critics. He had good reason. A.D. Hope swung a haymaker at his *Tree Of Man*, calling its style 'pretentious and illiterate verbal sludge.' Christina Stead, similarly accused, sailed into American waters, probably to avoid the stinginess of spirit that prevailed at the time. Christopher Brennan, of whom I have written lately, was one who was cruelly ignored, until his death prompted a flurry of newspaper discussions, a critical activity which now seems extinct. Brennan's apocalyptic vision of Australian anti-intellectuality was defended by John Sandes, who wrote in the *Sydney Morning Herald* on 5 September 1936 that:

His appeal is to the lettered few. Not at the first, or even at the second reading, will the line and mass of his thought emerge from his verse, but gradually there dawns on one an impression that this poet's plummet goes down to the profundities—that he takes soundings in a mighty ocean where the purely lyric poets never venture. A huge discontent with the present ways of living looms up with menace. One might say that the Celtic temperament of the poet has . . . blended with it . . . something of the old Hebraic denunciatory fire. (n. pag.)

I sometimes wonder if contemporary criticism in Australia misunderstood the literary nature and tradition of such negative dialectics; that unintentional truths emerged from not identifying with one entity or another, national or international. This splitting of the self was exactly what Brennan understood. He was a man who 'multiplied his own experience by reading and reflection, and lived in distant ages and remote countries' (McCrae, n. pag.).

I guess what I'm saying, is that the breezy generosity of articulation, the poetics of breadth, the humour of flight and fancy of American writing reaching towards a world elsewhere, is less visible in Australian letters. Of course there are catfights and dogfights over New York and California. But there always seems to be more of an idealisation of diversity in American writing, an elsewhere big enough to accommodate critique without falling into vituperation or succumbing to what Jacob Silverman called 'the epidemic of niceness' (Silverman n. pag.).

Somehow tight-lipped, contemporary Australian writers do not appear to be re-inventing themselves nearly as often, nearly as riskily and lubriciously as Americans. I think it is because, like the writing of most ex-colonial places, the inheritors of settlement histories are haunted by guilt. The Great Australian Novel, if written by a white person, can only ever be ironically named as such. There are too many unnamed Indigenous massacres, too many haunted places, to valorise any literary nation-building upon such a dour history. By never having killed its metaphoric forefathers, by not ever having had a real revolution and a constitution that made it unique, optimistic, forward-looking, independent and expansive, despite all the pitfalls of those ideals, Australian literature, at least in its early phases, was driven in upon itself. Patrick White's *Voss* is a perfect example of emotional exploration and self-repression.

Australian writers are therefore the most melancholic of writers, turned inward from lack of recognition, not least because of the fear of the difficulty of reception, many of whom eat themselves up from the inside, and in the present era, are supine before sales, overseas notice, and the theodicy of publicity and marketing.

While I have never felt it necessary to write characters bronzed by the sun and muscled by physical endeavour, stepping out of the sea in board-shorts proclaiming a new Neptunian nation, I do subscribe to an overuse of irony, especially with regard to the culture of the spectacle. Irony of course is one of the best counterweights to the paralysis of melancholy. And melancholy is 'the Australian way,' when that phrase is taken in its most generous sense, incorporating Indigenous losses and exiled Others. The employment of the counterweight of irony however, depends on having a knowing audience and a readership honed in the right interpretation of it. It is a members-only club. Irony causes trouble, and sends patriots into turmoil and it is often the style, as we appreciate it in the writing of Jonathan Swift, that allows us the confidence to make the ironic leap into what we think is the 'right' interpretation. Like Swift, the 'Wild Irish' in Brennan, his apocalyptic vision for Australia, may have served Australian letters better than any nationalistic portraiture.

But far from being a literal place or a literal country or nation, I would prefer to configure the writing country as a moment in time. It is a moment of exile, a moment of protest, a moment of subversion. As you may know, the ancient Chinese never disentangled the notion of space from the notion of time. Space *was* time and vice versa. Witness the number of Chinese intellectuals forced into timeless exile through the centuries. Einstein . . . a notable asylum seeker, refugee and exile . . . in formulating his theory of relativity, may have also stumbled across this Chinese chiasmus. The speed of light is the compression of space and the regression of time. Writing, it seems to me, is exactly that: a three-fold process comprising the moment of inspiration; the restrictions of form, of language and of syntax; and the slowing, indeed, the disorientation of time and space. It places the linear on a very low rung. You could describe these three stages as not only those of a writer's career over his or her lifetime—but of a writer's single, perhaps most representative work (because a novel is a lifetime)—as *lightning*, *agony* and *vertigo*. Or perhaps *inspiration*, *perspiration* and *puzzlement*. It is writing that is not easily consumed by the reader's recognition and familiarity. It is writing that is, as Steiner said, 'Eccentric, aloof, nostalgic, deliberately untimely' (11).

So welcome to my writing country. It is home and not home.

I have been lately wondering why the early years of writers we admire, with some rare exceptions, were generally so tumultuous, melancholic or traumatic. Now surely many people can claim a tumultuous, melancholic or traumatic childhood, but not all become successful writers. Perhaps I should qualify that by saying that not all become successful *literary* writers. Is it on account of the burdens of a sensitive nature, or the anarchy of language, or because of an over-reaching ambition to combine art with life, that one employs the best, and sometimes the most difficult means to be heard, understood, interpreted or read? Is it performance-driven; or anxiety-driven? Or driven by what the Germans call *Schadenfreude* which is pleasure derived from misfortune, usually of others? Literally the word means a damage to joy, which amongst writers is usually inverted: to destroy the joy in oneself for the sake of the work.

For most of my life I have attempted to read what the best of world literature had to offer. So much so that I am paying for my reading: extreme myopia, retinal detachments, less sight arriving with more insight. Undeterred, I now plough through biographies of writers, autobiographies, memoirs, essays and interviews on the lives of others. As the Nobel laureate J.M. Coetzee said recently, autobiography and fiction should not be disentangled. After all we use language, and language is not a scientific principle which we unearth to prove or disprove facts. The world of literature is about other kinds of truths. The world of theory and the world of criticism are also about other kinds of truths. Language is about psychological truths, aesthetic principles, judgements of taste, formal inventions and poetic kinships. As I've written elsewhere, categorisations of fact and fiction exert a disproportionate influence on reading. Children know more about this, since the idea of fact and fiction is not a disposable division for a child. There is only belief and disbelief in the formation of language-consciousness. This is the DNA of literature. So children are actually more 'literary' than adults, in that they are not intimidated by facts, and can only be convinced by how they feel about something or someone through language. By how they read or hear language.

So it is my conviction, upon reading the early lives of writers that there is one common underlying factor, from J.M. Coetzee to Jeanette Winterson, from Gustave Flaubert to Baudelaire, from Henry Lawson to Patrick White, and that this common factor forms the

storehouse of childhood in which the damage to joy is a constant. This storehouse is rich with lightning-flashes. But one pays for the light. One pays for it with ennui, with melancholy, with desolation and despondency. When a writer is struck by what is called ‘inspiration,’ often he or she will wonder why or wherefore it came, unconscious of the trace arching from the storehouse. It is more of a curse than a blessing. It means getting down to work, to enact what is often a failure. There are no instant rewards. In Einstein’s model, if a tram travels at the speed of light, time slows and the tram begins to travel backwards. Similarly, in writing, it is only much later that we hear the thunder, the echoes, the nuances of a novel or a poem. Mostly it is when the author is literally dead. Time’s arrow is always on a backward trajectory.

Let me reprise here, the three stages of my tentative investigation: those three stages of *lightning*, *agony* and *vertigo*. The lightning illuminating the storehouse of memory can be glimpsed in John Coetzee’s first encounter with music. We do not know, until it is pointed out, what effect emotions have on thinking, how music, of the spheres and of the heart, enables the language of genius. And here I want to quote from one reader, who, upon reading Coetzee’s book of literary essays entitled *Stranger Shores* was compelled to write the following:

It seems that there was a boy of fifteen, living in the suburbs of Cape Town in 1955. He was, as are many boys of his age, bored out of his mind, as he tells us, the main problem of existence in those days. Nothing much was going on. It was a Sunday afternoon. Young Coetzee had no reason that day, to think that anything much would go on either.

However, suddenly, from the house next door, he tells us that he heard some music that he had never heard of before. He was not at the time at all musically inclined, and still the music suddenly made him alert. This is how he describes the moment:

‘As long as the music lasted, I was frozen. I dared not breathe. I was being spoken to by the music as music had never spoken to me before.’ (Schall, n. pag.)

I cite this because it is a significant discovery not only on the boy’s part, but on the part of the reader. It is the lightning moment which enables a fuller understanding much later, of how personal experience, autobiography and Coetzee’s prose-style work in the context of what, for want of a better phrase, constitutes his ‘philosophical curiosity,’ his emotional intelligence stripped of all diverting metaphor. In one sense we have entered his writing country, and it has informed our own silence. It is not *material* which has been stored up that Coetzee is using, but a way of dealing with memory, writing through its veil, revealing and concealing and thus providing the greatest authenticity language can produce, riven with interrogation, self-doubt, repression and artifice. He is encountering a sublime moment, and the sublime, as we know, went through a sea-change during the Enlightenment. No longer a lofty moment, it transmits a vision of pleasure and power, of terror and catastrophe. It is something we already recognise as ‘strange.’ This, I would suggest, is a matter of style. For those who have no respect for style, it is easily dismissed. But the disturbance is there if they are sensitive to language, and they don’t know why it is so negative and powerful.

It is to Harold Bloom that I now turn to find an explanation of why our instinctual origins condemn our creativity to negativity. In his book *Agon: Towards a Theory of Revisionism*, he

argues that '[r]eading the later Freud teaches us that our instinctual life is agonistic and ultimately self-destructive and that our most authentic moments tend to be those of negation, contraction and repression' (98).

Bloom asserts that creativity is always a 'mode of repetition *and* of memory.' There is something in it which contains the death-drive and the anxiety of having to rid oneself of precursors. Bloom deftly connects this to Freud's notion of the uncanny. The homely or the canny—*Das Heimliche*—is transposed to its opposite, the uncanny or strange—*Das Unheimliche*—thus making the high Romantic notion of originality and the 'omnipotence of thought' an ideal of greatness. Freud however, was onto this anxiety of influence. In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* he writes: 'for this uncanny is in reality nothing new or foreign, but something familiar and old-established in the mind that has been estranged only by the process of repression' (148). In other words we appropriate as ours what a strong writer has articulated for us and we repress our influences. Michel Foucault says much the same thing in *The Order of Things*, where he states that poets unearth words whose kinships have remained, but whose origins have long been repressed or lost, thus forming resemblances that seem both strange and familiar. The Bach piece young Coetzee was hearing was his imaginative avatar and he made this experience both strange and familiar to us.

In her 'autobiography' (for want of a better word), Jeanette Winterson says much the same thing:

I believe in fiction and the power of stories because that way we speak in tongues. We are not silenced. All of us, when in deep trauma, find we hesitate, we stammer; there are long pauses in our speech. The thing is stuck. We get our language back through the language of others. We can turn to the poem. We can open the book. Somebody has been there for us and deep-dived the words. (9)

This notion of the uncanny drives us to go back before ourselves, before our own origins . . . to the foreigners, the Others, the barbarians. In fact, the etymology of the word *barbarian* is *babara*, the Latin for stammering, or stuttering. At the same time the uncanny drives us forward, making our connections beyond our death. We struggle to articulate what has been repressed. At the same time we are at home, and we do not wish to criticise home; but we *have* to in some way, to get beyond our origins, our repressions, the rule of the overbearing father, or the unbearable mother. We are censored and self-censoring. As George Steiner wrote, there is something of a paradox in being at home and in leaving home:

Very often it is censorship which ignites original genius. . . .

The key is domesticity. Where it is possible to sustain an area of 'housedness,' of familial routine, the psyche endures. One abdicates from the political. (181)

We have seen vast numbers of great writers and thinkers who have been politically exiled or who have employed self-exile in order to find their domesticity, to *work* and to seek asylum in their writing country: Alexander Solzhenitsyn, James Joyce, Thomas Mann, Sigmund Freud, Eric Auerbach and Theodor Adorno, to name but a few. They chafed at their adopted homes, but they never returned home.

When Jeanette Winterson returns to her mother's house after a terrible childhood and a long absence, the trauma of memory is palpable. Winterson is both housed and unhoused:

I got near 200 Water Street and heard her before I saw her, her back to the window onto the street, very upright, very big, playing her new electronic organ—‘In the Bleak Midwinter,’ with a jazz riff and cymbals. I looked at her through the window. It had always been through the window—there was a barrier between us, transparent but real—but it says in the Bible, doesn’t it, that we see through a glass darkly? She was my mother. She wasn’t my mother. I rang the bell. She half turned. ‘Come in, come in, the door’s open. (99)

What I have been trying to say in a roundabout fashion is that the unequivocal experiences of unhappiness and unhousedness forces writing into being. The drive to create takes its toll; it is unhealthy, damaging to the body, destructive of joy, but the *work* of creation alleviates this illness and in its obsessiveness and othering, driving the self outside into other selves, performs the narcissistic belief in the power of the work, thus returning the artist to health. I have written about this process elsewhere in relation to melancholy. The artifice of the childhood storehouse of trauma or depression is a useful edifice of artistic formation, an archive fever of wiping the slate clean in order to establish authority and origin. To make personal experience interesting, one has to understand the shape of what one is making, and fictioneering—if not buccaneering—with family and facts and childhood moments, is one way of finding this shape. History and fiction coalesce in the rhetoric of defense; of hiding and revealing.

Consider the employment of genealogy in the writing of the great French memoirist Chateaubriand—the writer, not the roast beef:

My name was first written as Brien, then as Briant and Briand, through an invasion of French orthography. Guillaume le Breton gives it as Castrum-Briani. There isn’t a name in France free of such variations.

My brother perished on the scaffold, my two sisters quitted a life of suffering after languishing in prison; my two uncles failed to leave enough to pay for the four planks of their coffin; while literature has caused me joy and pain, and with God’s help I still look forward to dying in the workhouse. (n. pag.)

You can see what a fictional biographer, or let’s call him or her a *fictioneer*, could do with this. Note again the melancholy, the embedded humour, the lightning flash of catastrophe which informs Chateaubriand’s take on the world. Housed and unhoused; the familiar made strange. He calls his work *Memoirs from Beyond the Tomb*. He speaks in revenge against time, against all comers.

The lightning stage then is a presumption and a presumptuousness of art and its idea. Writing, like all artistic endeavours, is initialised, driven and corrupted with ambition, influence and intention. It is a competitive business. One fails and as Samuel Beckett said, one has to fail again; fail better. Writing takes its toll. I notice that Philip Roth has recently hung up his pen. He has announced he will write no more; at least no more fiction. In an interview with a French magazine and subsequently quoted in the *Paris Review*, Roth says in passing that:

Writing means always being wrong. All your drafts tell the story of your failures. I don’t have the energy of frustration anymore, or the strength to confront myself. Because to write is to be frustrated. You spend your time writing the wrong word, the wrong sentence, the wrong story. You continually fool yourself,

you continually fail, and so you have to live in a state of perpetual frustration. You spend your time telling yourself, That doesn't work, I have to start again. Oh, that doesn't work either—and you start again. I'm tired of all that work. I'm in a different stage of my life. And I don't feel at all melancholy. (n. pag.)

Why Roth chose Paris to make his declaration is informative. The French have a very honorable tradition of closing one's career. Artists particularly, sell off more of their works at better prices than ever before. There will be no more. The end-of-career celebration is an institution which speaks paradoxically of elective hope and of despondency. Roth is genuinely puzzled by why he writes. His vertigo is caused by the agony of style and its recalcitrance before failure. There is no formula and no cure. Not to write is the only answer. Not to write is the noble pursuit of happiness.

Roth's lament is justified. The agony is always in melancholia, in the slowness of execution, the often puzzled reception, the dismissive attitude by readers to difficulty, the paralysis of depression engulfing the writer. Emmanuel Levinas has admirably articulated what he calls the 'uselessness of suffering' when meaning cannot be construed from it. In his book *Entre Nous: On Thinking-of-the-Other*, he disentangles pain from theodicy and in the context of the Holocaust, analyses the responsibility for the Other prior to, and beyond any reciprocity. I think it is this kind of ethics which also operates in writing, albeit through seeming disinterest. The vulnerability of sensibility, the offering of meaning to be deciphered, the responsibility for a kind of 'othering,' being housed and unhoused, an imaginative alterity, an alter-ego, are all part of what Levinas calls the 'interhuman.' It is in the nature of art not to destroy, but to create a non-indifference of one to another; to personalise and not to systematise the lives of others. To make individual and intimate what society systematises. But enough is enough. Perhaps there is too much writing and not enough contemplation. I think it was good I came to writing late, having spent my first thirty years in contemplation, refusing to write.

In my own case, being housed and unhoused was also the product of a kind of colonialism. My father, who was Portuguese and who often railed against British rule in colonial Hong Kong, nevertheless participated in it as a double agent. He was a soldier in its defense, a policeman in its repression of civil disorder and a failed businessman who had decided rather early on that China, in its eventual reclamation of the territory of Hong Kong, would exact revenge upon foreigners. Being European, he did what colonials did. He sent me to boarding school in Australia. I was already split the moment I became institutionalised in what I considered to be a penal colony. This process is probably a natural condition for a writer—to speak in contradictory voices; to enact what Edward Said called a *broken* identity. Said writes:

Most people are principally aware of one culture, one setting, one home; exiles are aware of at least two, and this plurality of vision gives rise to an awareness of simultaneous dimensions, an awareness that, to borrow a phrase from music, is *contrapuntal*. For an exile, habits of life, expression, or activity in the new environment inevitably occur against the memory of these things in another environment. (186)

The mark of the modern identity is, I think, to be troubled. To be troubled about identity. To be troubled about the loss of comfortable mythologies. To be troubled by the horrors of history. One response to this discomfort is to be creatively contradictory, to mount an argument with oneself. For an immigrant, exile or most foreigners, their discontinuous state

of being adds to this discomfort, which can become a chronic suffering. One is fragmented. One's style is fragmented and discontinuous and sometimes this is received with hostility, since it is not linear and comfortable and it doesn't validate identity. But this style is eminently portable. It can be constructed and deconstructed at will. It is a mobile home, a moveable archive, a caravan of self-caricature.

Complexity is the obvious path for a writer of exile to take. In Australia often the representation of a complex life is unfairly linked with difficulty as a criticism, or at worst, as victimage. Difficulty of course is not the national story, which has to be linear, reductive and uncomplicated. The idea of victimage—the little Aussie battler—had already been taken. Literature is quite different. It is not just a story; it is in effect, a resistance to telling. It shows by concealment; it reveals only through the test of time, unfolding like a flower when conditions are ripe: when reception is sensitive to language; when undercurrents and nuances are perceived. It is very much the task of the critic to unearth these movements. As George Steiner said: 'It is not so much the poet who speaks, but language itself' (46). The tragedy is that half the time the modern critic seems to have lost touch with the rich intertextuality of the language of literature. The modern drive is towards narrative and action, plot and idea. It is about media content, not form. Language is laid aside, along with the polyphony of the polyglot immigrant, the agonising silences of the asylum seeker and the necessity of being foreign to oneself. As Edward Said noted: 'Seeing "the entire world as a foreign land" makes possible originality of vision' (186). It is why Indigenous languages need to be preserved from extinction; why at the same time they are so magical, so secretive, so potent for those in the know.

A writer's writing country, then, is where one goes to maintain the magic of language. It is not an auditorium for a national fanfare; nor is it a parlour for the noisy trade of best-sellerdom. It is, as Toni Morrison said, the best place to be when the world is not right. It is more than the literal meaning of a room of one's own. So many writers have sought sanctuary in that moment when one hears the music of the sublime tinged with the terror of hearing too much. Perhaps that's why another Nobel laureate, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, made it a practice to rent a room atop a brothel, where he says, at eight in the morning, there is no more peaceful a place in the world. There, one is housed and unhoused; there one can imagine and take pleasure in the night before; there one has the license to be imaginatively licentious.

My own song has been a mixture of imagination and autobiography. Perhaps the name *Brian Castro* comes from the name Chateaubriand. In France, where often the surname comes first, I am known as 'Castrobrian.' 'Chateau' of course comes from the Latin 'castrum,' meaning a camp or castle. I don't know how the Wild Irish got in there, but the music and the rebellion certainly did. I don't know why my sisters were called Brenda and Sheila and Gloria and Sioban. Had my father had several secret affairs in the Emerald Isle? He did mention to me his love of Irish intonation, which he said reminded him of eclectic faces, changeable as an Irish summer's day; stormy one minute and sunny the next. He was always listening for the music in language. I don't know from whence I came, created through a recipe of Portuguese melancholy and Chinese stoicism, Hebraic neurosis and British bull-doggedness. But surely suspicion of belonging must be a historical experience in such a make-up? Is it a fault to suspect Utopian assimilation when all those Jews thought they were more German than German before 1933? Unthinking assimilation was made for betrayal. Exile made for bitterness. It all made for turmoil. But a writer, I decided early on, did not need to come from a specific place. He or she came from a writing country and this was no mean thing. Writing was to carry this responsibility, this passport through to others, and to history.

In my novel *Shanghai Dancing*, a voice from beyond-the-tomb exercised the right of the author to be dead. The weight of history did not mean one could automatically and immediately answer to the emotion of the moment.

While playing with the idea of veracity, I was aware of a further movement beyond language. As Naomi Schor pointed out in her 1996 lecture entitled ‘One Hundred Years of Melancholy,’ a lecture devoted to Chateaubriand:

Anonymity stalks the dead—the dead keep dying—because dying is not a singular event, but rather and implausibly an event that is given to repetition. Dead languages complete the inaccessibility of the dead: for the voice from beyond the grave to become audible it must speak an intelligible, that is a living, a *spoken* language; but language is an unreliable means of preservation, since languages too are threatened with extinction. (9)

Both inside and outside, both housed and unhoused, the dead narrator of *Shanghai Dancing* forms a testimonial made out of something beyond language: that is, of music. Music reaches beyond words. While Bruce Chatwin’s book *Songlines* may have been attacked for its lack of accuracy, song does declare territory. It marks out a written country as much as it marks out writing. In Western Literature we might call it *style*. Style cannot be divorced from music.

Music has always played a big part in my family. My sister was a budding concert pianist who won gold medals and then gave them away for a life of nursing. Another sister was a nightclub singer who once went out with Marlon Brando and returned home totally unimpressed. My father was a jazz musician who could play piano, saxophone and clarinet. He was entirely untaught and had an unerring ear with perfect pitch. No one knew he couldn’t read music. When Frank Sinatra came to Hong Kong with his big band, my father was called upon by the Musicians’ Union to fill in for a sick second-saxophonist. Sinatra also had perfect pitch but did not notice when in rehearsals my father failed to turn the pages of his sheet music. Movies, music and mayhem filled the storehouse of my childhood. It is perhaps why I don’t write linear novels or highly footnoted essays, why I have no great interest in the theoretical abstruseness of argumentation, why I am always listening for the music of prose, the leap of faith and the rhythm of excitement which springs unbidden from the greatest thinkers and writers. Music connects and comes round, as do the riffs and improvisations of prose. It is closely argued in patterns, in repetitions, in rhythms from prior readings. This stage of vertigo, outside time and space, as one critic argued, is ‘an a-genealogical dance of extinctions, ghosts and wounds, against which one’s active resistance involves *not* identifying with “”identities”” (Wang 16).

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‘Give me a child until the age of seven and I will give you the man.’ Within a single novel or within a whole career, a lifetime of writing is already enclosed in the space of strangeness, a familiarity with which opens the debate between death and existence. Literature is always untimely or out of time with the realities of the present. After the horrors of history, the only home available to us is writing. As Theodor Adorno wrote: ‘it is a part of morality not to be at home in one’s home’ (39).

So welcome to *my* country.

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