

Transnationalism and National Literatures: The Case of Australia

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Transnationalism should best be understood as a critical method, not as a description of inherent cultural forms, and so it is relatively easy to take a transnational approach to Australian or indeed any other kind of literature. Just as considerations of Medieval English literature have been enriched recently by a critical discourse that has elucidated points of crossover between Latin traditions and emerging vernacular languages, so Australian literature can productively be understood as both a nexus within, and a resistance to, larger orbits of globalisation. The key question here is not whether Australian literature itself is transnational, but what might be gained or lost in approaching the subject through such a critical matrix. Such an approach would of course cut against the assumptions implicit within the title 'The Association for the Study of Australian Literature,' a scholarly organisation based clearly upon a national paradigm, although in historical terms it is easy enough to understand the rationale behind its emergence. Writing in 1991, Sara Dowse attributed the founding of ASAL in 1978 to the attempt by a 'band of stalwarts' to resist 'the domination of the British canon in key university English departments around the country' (42), and in this sense the field of Australian literature has long been engaged professionally in an effort to carve out and consolidate space for itself from under the hegemonic shadow of English literature.¹ The process here is very similar in kind to that which American literature underwent when it began to be established as a legitimate subject on university curricula during the first half of the twentieth century, with F.O. Matthiessen titling his famous 1941 book *American Renaissance* in a specific attempt to prove to his sceptical Harvard colleagues that his chosen five authors (Emerson, Thoreau, Hawthorne, Whitman and Melville) were as good as any produced by the Renaissance in England.

But even while recognising the pragmatic usefulness of such interventions, it is also important theoretically to be aware of what tends to be elided or overlooked through such a nationalist template. Australian literature as a discursive field has been shaped by a wide range of social and political pressures, including British colonial settlement and the postcolonial reaction against it, the apparatus of Federation and the development of national consciousness in the early twentieth century, and the various experiences, traumatic and otherwise, associated with Indigenous culture. More recently, it has also been shaped pedagogically by Cultural Studies approaches that have now become firmly embedded in both secondary and tertiary education. This latter pressure has brought about specific opportunities, but, in terms of literary studies, also significant drawbacks. One of the great strengths of Australian literary studies in recent times has been the breadth of its intellectual engagement, encompassing dimensions—from economics and sociology to psychoanalysis and gender studies—that might, in other countries, have been sequestered under different disciplinary formations. In this way, the general paucity of institutional support and funding for literary studies has forced collaborative and interdisciplinary enterprises that may well, at least for some aspects of the subject, have been energising. On the other hand, Peter Carey has complained with some justification that Australian students typically learn how to 'decode' texts before they learn how to read them, and one of the risks associated with the introduction of Foucault as early as high school is to position literature itself as an irredeemably secondary phenomenon, something to be drawn on only for instrumental or exemplary purposes.

Similarly, the relative financial poverty of the Australian university sector—certainly by comparison with wealthy private institutions in the United States or the ancient Oxbridge colleges in England, which are not dependent solely on taxpayer revenues—has produced a situation where Australian academics are liable always to find themselves at the mercy of short-term political cycles. Australian scholars are beholden professionally to public pressures, with respect to student enrolment numbers and the provision of government-sponsored research grants, in a way that most of their American and British counterparts do not experience in quite the same direct fashion. It is true, of course, that the viability of public ‘impact’ is now becoming a watchword everywhere, but most American university presses continue to be subsidised by their home institutions in a way that allows them to produce works geared almost exclusively towards academic markets, something that in turn allows this publishing sphere to be relatively autonomous in a way that the University of New South Wales Press, for example, and its Australian peers, would not recognise. In England, similarly, both Oxford University Press and Cambridge University Press are sufficiently rich and well established not to have to concern themselves unduly about commercial considerations; though of course both presses have large trade operations, these effectively cross-subsidise their academic lists, for which the sole publishing criterion is what these presses consider to be scholarly merit, with their editorial processes being overseen by boards of delegates and syndicates to assure the academic integrity of these systems. Both sides of this operation function in a symbiotic manner: the symbolic capital associated with academic publishing underpins the global brand on which the trade division depends to sell its dictionaries and language-teaching books, whose commercial profits in turn support the academic lists. But because this kind of infrastructure is less firmly established in Australia, where its perception of the restricted academic market has (for example) led OUP’s Melbourne branch to focus exclusively on reference material rather than underwriting scholarly publications, the whole field of literary studies in this country has found itself too exposed to the directives of ‘public intellectuals’ in the print and broadcast media, who often have an axe to grind against what they take to be the obfuscations of academic jargon. The *Australian* and other periodicals have consistently promoted a middlebrow ethos that appears hostile almost as a matter of principle to anything it considers unduly abstruse or difficult, and this has resulted in a damaging situation whereby Australian literature, unlike its American or British counterpart, finds itself trapped within an anti-intellectualist regime of production and consumption, without any kind of strong academic network to offer compelling counter-narratives.

It is important to recognise, however, that such anti-intellectualism is not just the preserve of particular individuals or institutions, but has also been embedded in subtle and intricate ways within the historical trajectory of Australian literature. An impetus of subversion, of seeking deliberately to upend Western norms, can be traced back to the days of Joseph Furphy, whose iconoclastic fiction self-consciously turned its back on the conventions of the English and American novel while, as Gerald Wilkes observed long ago, reconfiguring these rhetorical tropes for parodic purposes (46). The anti-intellectualism in Furphy, in other words, involves not simple boorishness, but rather a principled inversion and transposition of Eurocentric norms. Les Murray is a prime example of a contemporary Australian writer within this double-edged tradition, through which anterior intellectual models are evoked and revoked simultaneously. After a reading that Murray gave at the University of Sydney in April 2014, I asked him what poem he thought he would be best remembered for in a hundred years, to which his interesting response was ‘It Allows a Portrait in Line-Scan at Fifteen,’ a work arising from the experience of Murray’s own autistic son. When I remarked politely how I admired this poem because it also raises issues of communication and representation more

generally, Murray fixed me with a steely stare and said: 'I hate that kind of talk.' Such demotic cantankerousness has long been part of Murray's public persona, of course, but problems would arise if academics were simply to take such deflationary statements as gospel truth, just as critics of Modernism could never do justice to the poetry of T.S. Eliot or Ezra Pound if they were to read it simply as extrapolations from the overt statements made by Eliot or Pound about Anglo-Catholicism or anti-Semitism. Murray is a great poet because of the expansive way in which he appropriates discourses from classical pastoral, medieval theology and German modernism while reimagining them all in relation to a contemporary Australian context, just as Eliot and Pound are great poets precisely because their views on religion and politics are balanced in complex and sometimes contradictory ways with much broader aesthetic projections of the human world.

Australian literary scholars, browbeaten on all sides as obscurantists and often lacking a proper sense of their own intellectual autonomy, have sometimes been too willing to accept the kind of plain man demeanour projected by Murray and his compatriots at face value. The cumulative effect of this has been a wilful amnesia about Australian literature's place within the wider world, and an emphasis instead on populist modes of biography or other easily accessible critical modes, something that can quickly become intellectually debilitating. The close institutional affiliation between Australian Literature and Creative Writing courses, something else emphasised to an unusual extent on both economic and philosophical grounds within the Australian educational system at all levels, has similarly worked against more stringent analytical readings of the country's major writers. Rather than considering Murray's texts in relation to the historical dynamics of literary genre or the manifold ambiguities of cultural representation, appreciations of his work have tended at times more towards either an imaginary form of 'creative' empathy or a condition of popular journalism, as for example with the largely predictable and quite tiresome discussions of Murray's lukewarm attitudes towards the notion of cultural diversity. It is true that Murray himself enjoys playing up to his own celebrity image as a man of the people, as we saw with his flamboyant attack on Richard Flanagan's *The Narrow Road to the Deep North* as 'pretentious and stupid' after the Prime Minister's Literary Awards in 2014, and it is also true that, as a spokesperson for what he calls 'the vernacular republic,' a constitutional egalitarianism has always been a profound aspect of Murray's intellectual agenda. But egalitarianism as an aesthetic and political principle does not necessarily require mere plain speaking as its critical corollary. Walt Whitman's invocation of a 'divine average' (176) in *Leaves of Grass* involves a powerful sense of philosophical levelling, one that positions itself against the ossified hierarchies of British traditions, but it does so through a highly elaborate and sophisticated poetic style whose explicit idiom of transparency also embraces obliquities of manner and vision, which American literary critics over the past 150 years have taken pains to elucidate. Murray will surely come to be regarded in due course as a writer as important to English language poetry as Whitman, but the reception of his work during his own lifetime has been hindered by some Australian literature specialists lacking a sufficiently long view of the English poetic traditions that Murray seeks to reorient, and consequently tending to pigeon-hole him within narrower social categories.

All of this means that Australian literature as a subject cannot properly be accommodated within any kind of nationalist teleology. There has been interesting work recently from Tamara S. Wagner, Janet C. Myers and others on how closely nineteenth-century English literature was imbricated within colonial politics of one kind or another, and such a wide-angle lens works significantly to broaden out the horizons of the English literary field, indeed to make it more usefully categorised as 'Literature in English,' where the dynamics of home

and abroad are always, from any given vantage point, interfacing with each other. If one of the drawbacks of postcolonial criticism in its late-twentieth-century incarnation was an insistence on relating all imaginative writing to conditions of political resistance and national allegory, one of the emerging strengths of World Literature is its attention instead to processes of reciprocity, with a concurrent emphasis on how various forms of literature and culture in different parts of the world intersect with each other, sometimes in circuitous ways. One of the reasons that American literary studies was for so long uncomfortable with the idea of a transnational turn was because the subject had internalised and naturalised assumptions of exceptionalism that positioned U.S. culture as central and the rest of the world as marginal. Similarly, one reason Australian literary studies has been uncomfortable with transnationalism is because of its underlying investment in a protectionist intellectual economy whereby the home culture has come to be regarded as a centripetal point of refuge from the rest of the world. This idea of nationalism as reaction is expressed most vituperatively in Miles Franklin's late phase, and it also manifests itself in the highly ambivalent responses of the general Australian public in the twenty-first century to issues surrounding the global economy and immigration, but such ring-fenced instincts also characterise the intellectual politics that have circumscribed the reception of Alexis Wright's most recent novel, *The Swan Book*. Wright, like Murray, is a writer of planetary breadth whose twenty-first century novels seek to redefine ecological issues in planetary terms, just as Toni Morrison twenty years earlier sought to redefine questions of race on a global scale. But despite Wright's own professed ambition to write works of fiction that would resist the 'Australian tradition of creating boundaries and fences which encode the development of thinking in this country' ('On Writing *Carpentaria*' 81), Australian critics have continued possessively to consider Wright merely in terms of a politics of environmentalism and Indigeneity, dimensions that the aesthetic qualities of her own novels constantly exceed. Fiction, so Wright has argued, penetrates 'more than the surface layers and probes deep into the inner workings of reality,' whereas 'Non-fiction is often about the writer telling what is safe to tell' ('Politics of Writing' 13); but time and again Australian readers of Wright, influenced both by Foucauldian systems of decoding and by the simplifying practices of popular journalism, have insisted on reducing the multifarious and highly ambivalent nature of Wright's narratives to a more proselytising style of politics.² Wright herself has expressed admiration for a range of international writers, particularly the Mexican author Carlos Fuentes, on the grounds that, as she put it, she 'could not find the words I was searching for in Australian literature' ('Politics of Writing' 11–12). Hence to locate Wright simply within a rubric of 'Australian literature' is drastically to diminish the range of her work, to compress its planetary scope into a much more restrictive domestic circumference.

One of the abiding hazards associated with area studies of any kind is tautology, the issue of starting with assumptions that are bounded both geographically and epistemologically, and consequently finding only what you want to find, seeing what you expect to see. In American literary criticism of the 1950s and 1960s, the perennial focus on mythic constructions such as 'the frontier' or 'the American Dream' effectively blinded a whole generation of students both to transnational crosscurrents and the various differentiations of race and gender that underpinned such formulations. Similarly with Australian literary studies there is an ongoing risk of tunnel vision arising from a critical method predicated upon the tenets of nationalism, and in this sense I have to say the notion of an undergraduate degree in 'Australian Literature' seems to me as intellectually absurd as an equivalent one in 'Australian Philosophy' would be. Various accidents of institutional history conspired to introduce the Australian Literature major at the University of Sydney subsequent to the establishment of the first chair in 1963, but the problem here involves a degree of specialisation upon a knowledge base that is far too

narrow. A student of Alexis Wright who knows nothing about Fuentes or the rhetoric of magical realism would be in the same boat as a student trying to read Australian philosophers such as John Anderson or J.E. Malpas without any prior knowledge of Kant or Wittgenstein, with such severe truncations of conceptual perspective liable to prove entirely counterproductive in terms of any intellectual end product. There is certainly a case for postgraduate specialisation in this field, along with staff appointments and individual units of study, but there are to my knowledge no undergraduate degree courses in the world devoted entirely to American Literature, with the latter subject flourishing at undergraduate level precisely because it is interwoven with curricular designs across a much broader range.³ Furthermore, one of the reasons Australian writers from the last 200 years are not as well-known as they should be on the world stage was the general reluctance of twentieth-century Australianists to bring these authors properly into dialogue with writers in other contexts. Henry Handel Richardson is as much an integral part of Modernism as E.M. Forster or Virginia Woolf, but such a repositioning of Richardson within Modernist contours requires an understanding of the complex trajectories linked to the broad development of this Modernist field across a transnational spectrum, and this is a move that earlier specialists in Australian literature were, for whatever reason, generally unable or unwilling to make. This problem was of a reciprocal nature, in that Australianists who were keen to explore international perspectives, such as Dorothy Green in her 1973 book on Henry Handel Richardson, tended to find their work not of compelling interest to mainstream academic publishers in Europe or North America. But as the idea of 'World Literature' gathers momentum and Australian literature gradually expands its global profile—the biggest academic market for this subject is not, at the moment, in Australia itself, but in China—it is likely that such reverse perspectives will work increasingly to defamiliarise domestic assumptions in interesting new ways. It is true that appreciation of local contexts can sometimes become attenuated in transnational readings of literary texts, but they can also offer alternative angles of vision capable of opening up narratives in new ways, just as transnational critiques of Herman Melville from a transatlantic vantage point may have known (and cared) less about the author's involvement with American domestic politics but, conversely, illuminated significant ways in which his novels engage intertextually with the works of Milton and Shakespeare. It would not be difficult, for instance, to envisage a Chinese account of Australian literature focussing less on the literary cliques of Sydney or Melbourne and more on its engagement with questions of the global environment or international class conflict, and it is likely to be the case that the transposition of Australian literary studies into different spheres as the twenty-first century develops will substantially modify this subject's shape and status.

This is not to downplay the significance of local knowledge, not to undervalue the importance of experiential proximity. I concur with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's skepticism about the 'scopic vision' of what she calls the 'Moretti-style comparativist,' with his tendency to equate 'map-making literary criticism' with a 'world literature' project more generally (108, 6, 39), and I agree it is important that any global abstraction should always be counterpointed by the thick descriptions of particular situations. Indeed, transnationalism as a critical procedure seeks to keep in view the material circumstances of local politics, while criss-crossing them with vectors not rigidly bound to domestic parameters, and this differentiates it from the older styles of Comparative Literature, whose emphasis in the 1950s on the idealised typologies of literary genre tended to give it an abstract, universalist inflection. But if the global should be counterpointed by the local, it is also important, reciprocally, that local wisdom should also be informed by global theory, and it is precisely such openness to wider planetary orbits that Australian literature, as the subject institutionalised itself in the modern academy, has sometimes lacked. Bruce King complained in 1996 of how '[e]ven today the better Australian

authors, such as Thomas Keneally and Frank Moorhouse, are criticized by those who insist on local subject matter' (6) and a similar sense of principled localism informed some aspects of Peter Pierce's *Cambridge History of Australian Literature*, published as late as 2009. This situation is now beginning to change, of course, and there have been many fine critical discussions of particular Australian writers within a transnational context, particularly over recent years. However, I think there may still be scope for a more systematic comparative approach to the subject, building for example on Chadwick Allen's study of Indigenous narratives across Native American and Maori cultures, or developing some of the highly illuminating work on race and civil rights in the United States and South Africa into a triangular equation, whereby the extremely problematic cultural history of race relations in Australia would also be brought into this comparative field.⁴ Such an analysis would involve not just a 'celebration' of Australian literature, in the manner of the popular media, but rather a more theoretically engaged attempt to integrate the subject into an academic mainstream.

It is truly lamentable that the full range of Australian literary achievement across the nineteenth and twentieth centuries has not yet been received its due prominence, and one reason for this is perhaps a certain kind of critical pusillanimity, an altogether unwarranted fear that the visibility of Australian culture might evaporate entirely unless preserved in a protectionist blanket. Innes Willox, Australian consul general to Los Angeles between 2006 and 2008 and more recently Chief Executive of the Australian Industry group, noted in a 2014 talk in Canberra how we 'do not talk ourselves up' in Australia, despite having all the institutions and expertise to comprise an advanced knowledge economy, and in the realm of ideas this may correspond to an amorphous anxiety about how a more fluid marketplace of ideas would disrupt settled assumptions about Australian literature. By contrast, Spivak on her first visit to Australia in 1984 said in an interview with Elizabeth Grosz that she believed her recent thinking about 'discontinuities' and 'deconstructive morphology' had been shaped by her experiences in Australia:

I believe that many of these answers would have been impossible if my experience in Australia—and I have given 16 lectures in 2 weeks—had not almost obliged me to think through the implications of what I have been doing, and in a sense the place of Australia on the map is so problematic, the way in which it relates to and is going to relate to Asia in the coming years, the place in which it seems to construct itself in relation to Western Europe and Anglo-U.S. It seems to me that, as someone of Asian provenance, working in the United States with a certain *carte d'identité* in Western Europe and Britain, I think I have been really pushed to the extreme—of having to take stock and having to see exactly what it was that I was up to. (Grosz 187)

Rather than recycling journalistic clichés or subordinating themselves to the 'impact' of market demands, Australian literature specialists would do well to consider Spivak's sense of the country's enigmatic situation on the global stage and the ways in which its fictions provoke questions not just about Australia but about the wider world.

NOTES

1 Dowse, who was born in Chicago, tended herself to survey the Australian cultural scene from a transnational perspective, balancing empathetic engagement with critical detachment.

2 On Wright and environmentalism, see for example Jessica White, 'Fluid Worlds: Reflecting Climate Change in *The Swan Book* and *The Sunlit Zone*.' *Southerly* 74.1 (2014): 142–63.

3 There are, of course, many undergraduate programmes in American Studies and similar interdisciplinary formations, although these have become less popular since the heyday of area studies in the mid-twentieth century. UCLA introduced an undergraduate major in ‘American Literature and Culture’ in 2011, and there are many undergraduate degree programmes in English and American Literature, but none, so far as I know, in American Literature *per se*.

4 Chadwick Allen, *Blood Narrative: Indigenous Identity in American Indian and Maori Literary and Activist Texts* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2002), and *Trans-Indigenous: Methodologies for Global Native Literary Studies* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2012). For comparative scholarship between South Africa and the United States, see for example Deborah Seddon, “‘Be a Mighty Hard Message’: Toni Morrison and the Exploration of Whiteness in the Post-Apartheid Classroom.” *Safundi* 15.1 (2014): 29–52, and various other articles in *Safundi*.

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