

CONTEMPORARY AUSTRALIAN WRITERS AND EUROPE

Igor Maver

It is amazing to see just how much travel writing, writing which does not exclusively belong to the travel sub-genre of "creative non-fiction", and also how many non-Australian locales, with emphasis on European and Asian ones, there are in the recent contemporary Australian writing since the 1960s. This perhaps speaks about a certain preoccupation or downright trait in the Australian national character. Perhaps, it is a reflection of a particular condition of being "down under", itself derived from "a tradition of colonialism and post-colonialism; from geographical location, both a deterrent and a spur; from post-Romantic literary tradition, coinciding with the early years of white settlement; and from the universal lure of ideas of travel, never more flourishing than at the present" (Hergenhan, Petersson xiii).

Tourism is an increasingly global phenomenon to some extent shaping the physical reality as well as the spiritual world of the people involved in it. Within this globalization process, with the prospect of "cyber" travel, there is, however, always an individual "national" experience of the country of destination that a literary traveller puts into words, an experience which is typical and conditioned by specific socio-political and cultural circumstances. Some travellers, and one must needs distinguish between travellers and tourists, the latter of whom are generally more passively acquiescent about the target country and its culture, are generally fascinated by the development of jet travel, which enables to cross "in a few hours the same distance that cost Marco Polo years of his life" (James 48). Others again find that "air travel and the mass movement of world tourism has so homogenised the globe... that the ambition to 'experience' cultural difference or to 'explore' the foreign is futile. 'Escape' is impossible: rampant Western commercialism has despoiled the world" (Gerster 354). Paul Fussell has thus drawn the limit between exploration (which was in itself a form of colonization), travel, and tourism (a new form of spiritual, cultural as well as economic colonization, perhaps?), according to which Australian *literati* are mostly travellers and rarely merely tourists or explorers:

... the explorer seeks the undiscovered, the traveller that which has been discovered by the mind working in history, the tourist that which has been discovered by entrepreneurship and prepared for him by the arts of mass publicity (Fussell 39).

Firstly, accounts by Australian writers of fiction and creative non-fiction are discussed, those that are based on their various European experiences and ways of representing them in the anthological book of Australian travel writing *Changing Places: Australian Writers in Europe* published in 1994 (poems are to be dealt with separately). The book represents a bold attempt to make a representative selection of the increasingly more abundant travel writing produced by Australian writers, essayists and journalists over the past three decades or so. Of course, it is one thing to look at these writings as documentary texts having a certain socio-historical merit, and it is another to try to see in them and assess them as artistic texts that appeal to readers all over the world, regardless of their interest in things Australian. These texts are, in some ways, even more interesting to a European than they are to an Australian, for individual European nation(alitie)s may see themselves in them through the eyes of “outsiders”, detached observers who, in turn, try to recapture something of their own and European past or present in various European locales. Many of the selected texts are artistic to the extent that they do, in fact, have a greater or lesser appeal of artistic universality, which transcends the borders of time and place as far as readership is concerned. Regardless of the specific topic described, travel texts enable some sort of identification of the reader with his/her own experiences abroad and feelings connected with it, such as homesickness, demystification of certain topoi, illusions nourished about various *genius loci*, ways of behaviour and lifestyle, cultural shocks, myths about a certain country that die hard, etc. In his description of what he calls the “Australian tourist novel”, Graham Huggan, for example, also speaks of some sort of “shame” in travellers who are aware of the fact that they themselves are very much the cause of cultural degradation (especially in Asia) caused by mass tourism (Huggan 170-71). Could one speak about the same phenomenon in Europe, in the places of traditional “cultural pilgrimage” that are each year swarmed by visitors from all over the world? Secondly, the book which does not feature Australian travel writing, but is, interestingly, aimed at (primarily American) travellers coming to Australia, will also be mentioned here as a counterpoint to Australians' experiences of Europe, namely *Australia: A Traveler's Literary Companion*, edited by Robert Ross. And thirdly, the new book *A Sea Change: Australian Writing and Photography*, to accompany the forthcoming Olympic Games in 2000 will be examined in the context of travel and national stereotyping.

Much has been written about the various aspects of a “literary travel”, from the imagological implications of Europe in (Anglo-)Australian literature, which showed that the transfer of traditional British heterostereotypes to the Australian context has mostly resulted in a marked difference between the traditional heterostereotypes and the new conveyed Australian images of (Continental) Europe (cf. Petersson 1990; Bader 1992), to the examination of the concept of Australian “literary geography” (cf. Leer 1991). Whole conferences (Jurak 1983) and books have been dedicated to the description of individual European perspectives of Australian literature (Capone 1991; Maver 1997), however, few anthological books of selected writings in one way or another connected with travel, departure and/or arrival, have so far seen the light of day. One of the early attempts was the anthology *Australians Abroad* edited by Charles Higham and

Michael Wilding way back in 1967 (Higham & Wilding), which did not include poetry. Another much more recently published anthology is *On the Move: Australian Poets in Europe*, which, in contrast, features exclusively verse and came out only in 1992, edited by Geoff Page (Page).

The editors of the book *Changing Places: Australian Writers in Europe* point out in the introduction that they used the term “travel writing” not to refer to a separate genre, but in an embracing sense, to suggest the differences rather than to elide them in order “to include representations of encounters of various kinds, direct and indirect, with another land and culture, written in various genres and discourses - fiction, poetry, nonfiction, journalism, autobiography or 'life writing', interviews, guides, notebooks and so on” (Hergenhan, Petersson xiv). The reason editors concentrated on the last thirty years of travel writing is, they claim, in that Australian writers have during this time left “fingerprints” on their perceptions of other peoples and cultures. The editors observe that the fixed ideas of Australian nationality have recently broken down and opened up new possibilities in literary representation also under such influences as the Vietnam protest years, the rise of feminism and multiculturalism. European history, myths and the Australian “history of ideas”, as the trendy scholarship would have it, are thus being rewritten and this also has contributed to the reworking of Australian self-definition. Indeed, stereotypes have been undermined, such as, for example, the one about Europe representing the cultural cradle, and, on the other hand, Australia as the Great Emptiness on the fringe, far away from the central (imperial) British Heart. This process, paradoxically, works both ways: while it stresses the European cultural roots of Australia by modifying traditional images of Europe as the “cradle”, it also deconstructs this very concept and makes Australians more susceptible to non-European traditions that shape Australian reality.

There are four large groupings of texts in the book, each depending on the objective and/or mode of travel. The first one focuses on travel and expatriation, the second on the rituals and conventions of travel, the third on the heritage seeking and cultural pilgrimages, and the fourth one concentrates on the political climate as reflected in travel writing. One of the underlying ideas one can sense in all of these writings is that there has been a great development in seeing Europe and consequently also Australia differently since the 1960s, when Australia seemed a culturally backward and arid place and the sole alternative seemed expatriation, and the more recent times when Australia does not seem such a bad place to live and to write in. What's more, at present repatriations even take place and Australia is itself becoming a “destination” for Europeans. Feminist theory and women's writing have likewise left an indelible mark both on Australian travel writing and its gender-shifting of perspectives. The editors thus also set out to answer perhaps “the hardest question of all” (Hergenhan, Petersson xxvi) whether there is a noticeable difference to be detected between male and female travel writing in its representation of Europe. The question was successfully addressed by Jane Robinson in her seminal book on travel writing by women *Wayward Women: A Guide to Women Travellers*:

Throughout the centuries spanned by this book, men have been setting out for the world with some definite purpose in mind, with reputations

to forge and patrons to please, and their written accounts have been dedicated to tangible results. Women, whether travelling by choice or default, had for the most part no such responsibilities: they left the facts and figures of foreign travel to the men, and dwelt instead on the personal practicalities of getting from A to B, and on impression (Robinson ix-x).

The anthology of contemporary travel writing *Changing Places: Australian Writers in Europe*, includes texts based on travel experience as expressed in fictional and non-fictional accounts. In many cases these are auto- or semi-autobiographical, which means that this travel writing may also be labelled as, recently very popular, literary autobiography with all of its distinctive genre features. Some authors describe “cultural travelling”, pilgrimages to places known from (high) art and literature, others again involve the traveller in some kind of “learning” process which enables him/her to arrive at a new understanding of the culture observed and of their own, or they can entail a social or political insight and the awakening of the traveller to problems of gender, ethnicity or truth about one's own relationship with a partner.

Looking at some of the anthologized writings in the first section of the book titled “Travellers, Tourist and Expatriates”, Charmian Clift speaks about her life in Europe, in Greece, where she spent ten years, mostly on the island of Hydra, with her children (among them the later author Martin Johnston) and husband who also was a writer and journalist George Johnston. After fourteen years away from Australia they both suddenly started to get homesick and decided to go back to Australia. In her description of the much-visited Greek island of Hydra she ironizes the mystique of an expatriate type living there, not necessarily an Australian, a “nomadic tribe of young men which moves across Europe with the changing seasons on a defined trail” (7), consisting of “Europe-sick boys” (9), who yearn for the Europe of Gertrude Stein and Scott Fitzgerald and who already are lost or in order to get lost “again”:

They all speak very good French and have a smattering of Italian and Spanish and German and Arabic; they have all met Rilke's wife or Utrillo; they lived next door but one to Wystan Auden on Ischia or Dali on the Costa Brava; at Majorca one summer they had the opportunity to work with Robert Graves... they have read the reviews of the latest books and the latest plays, and talk knowledgeably about action painting, erotic symbols, psychosomatic disorders, the doctrines of nihilism and existentialism, and collage (8).

There are several more accounts dedicated to Greece, to its sense of community, family life, its intimacy and reliability, which is seen in dichotomic terms both as a cradle of European and also Australian culture and as a banal polluted and materialistic modern world, by Martin Johnston, Patrick White, Gillian Bouras, Beverly Farmer who spent in Greece three years and drew on her experiences there in several short story collections (e.g. *A Body of Water*). Many did leave in the fifties and sixties but, as they claim, would not leave today. Bouras, for example, an Australian expatriate living in Greece (*Aphrodite and*

Others, 1994), speaks of a different kind of migration from that which we are generally used to in the Australian context, she is an Australian “migrant” in Greece, whose relationship with her children was so much affected by migration that she can now “understand the particular grief of migrant mothers in Australia” (34). The famous Australian expatriate, second only perhaps to Germaine Greer, Peter Porter who has lived in England for a great number of years, describes his departure for England in 1951 where he has remained ever since. However, he echoes what seems to be the most typical expatriate experience and proves the one thing people have in common, one has only one Home, one can have adopted homes but the single one remains. Porter says: “To sum up: it has never crossed my mind to think of myself as anything other than Australian. Where I live and what I write about is another matter. To paraphrase the Emperor Franz Joseph, I am a patriot for me. My true country is my imagination” (53). For Porter England is an agglomeration of friends, colleagues and places, where he has pursued his career as a writer, rather than something he would call an adopted home, for, he adds, “The longer I live here the less I feel I know the place. I am just as expatriated from Britain and Europe as I am from Australia” (51).

Christina Stead is a famous Australian literary expatriate. She spent the greater part of her life abroad in Europe, the United States and North America. In her piece “Leaving 1928; Returning 1969” she, with some nostalgia and subtle self-irony, describes her thoughts aboard a ship returning home to Australia. When the ship lands at Darwin everybody is overwhelmed, she is baffled:

It was there, over the walls, through partitions, in the women's rooms, that there came in high, tired, bangslapping voices, “Isn't it good to be home?” “Yes, what a relief!” “Better than Europe!” “Oh, yes I had enough of Europe.” And carolling the gladness like magpies singing with parrots, strangers behind doors, “Yes, it is good to be home.” (One comes out.) “How long were you in Europe?” “Three weeks - three long weeks. And you?” “Two months.” “How did you stand it?” (Forty years of Europe! - I left quietly.) (56).

It is no coincidence that Helen Garner's description of her Paris days begins with the description of food preparation, a heated debate between a French man and an Australian woman, based on her life in Paris. They cannot seem to get along on how to prepare it. He even suggests they should consult the *Larousse Gastronomique*, for, in his view, where she comes from (Australia) “the food is barbaric” (79). She is enraged and the cultural “incompatibility” comes to express itself in her reply:

“But it is only food,” said the woman. “In the final analysis that's what it is. It's to keep us alive. It's to stop us from feeling hungry for a couple of hours so we can get our minds off stomachs and go about our business. And all the rest is only decoration (80).

To Marion Halligan the French dish *aligot* symbolically helps her no longer to feel a tourist on a pilgrimage, but in her head the little place on the plateau Aubrac in Auvergne. Halligan's book on travel and food is called *Eat My Words*

(1990) and draws on her experiences of living in France. She also greatly admires the Gothic church architecture there and writes the following, which is very telling in the days when the Australasian connection is much favoured in Australia:

I've been in Bangkok and admired the temples there, found them amazing pieces of architecture and moving too in an intellectual way, but I don't love them, they don't belong to me, I don't identify with them. I feel much the same about Asian food; it's delicious, I enjoy it very much, but it's not finally important to me. We're always being told to look to Asia, that this is the sphere of influence in which Australia lives, but my civilisation belongs to Europe" (82).

In the second section of the book "Trails and Trials: The Rituals and Conventions of Travel" Kate Grenville describes her travelling on a bus trip throughout Europe to Greece and finds the journey of thus "doing" Europe very tiring and seems to be disappointed with every single country she encounters. Is this perhaps the result of the unpleasant mode of travel, for generalizations she produces are sometimes but certainly not always to be taken for granted? All of her advance ideas about each country are turned upside down. For example, in Germany there is "the drama of a frontier: this is Germany", Italians are "rude and ignorant", while entering the border into the former Yugoslavia "seems all guns and stubbly big-jowelled faces and those peaked caps that South American dictators wear" (107-8). Hal Porter, when he travels, travels with "the baggage of memory" constantly encountering "shadows". Every site he comes to reminds him of the past, of its cultural or literary references: "To travel thus slyly equipped with orts of history is to spend an intoxicating time even if you're only bumping into shadows. These may have acute elbows, piggy-wig-pink rubber faces, garlic-striped breaths, and voices like those of hinnies or cartoon mice..." (135).

The third section of the book, aptly called "Origins, Heritage, Pilgrimages", commences with Jill Ker Conway's account "Recharting the Globe" in which she looks back on the "necessary pilgrimage to Stratford-on-Avon" (150). She and her mother, who accompanies her, come to the conclusion that what they experience is "self-positioning", a fact very common to most Australian visitors in Europe. All travel entails a redefinition of one's own position on the globe especially in relation to one's home country. Conway ends by saying that upon her return to Sydney she "knew" where she was, in the beautiful Sydney, and she promises herself never again to speak about the Far East. By going away she is able to "come home". Shirley Hazzard is also on a cultural pigrimage, trying to define the Source, cultural, personal, in the Mediterranean and particularly in Tuscany. She is a short story writer, novelist (*Transit of Venus*, 1980) and essayist who has spent most of her life abroad, in the USA, travelling frequently to Europe and especially Italy. Hazzard draws on the lives of many previous famous literary visitors to the place, from P. B. Shelley, E. M. Forster to D. H. Lawrence, concluding, finally, that "the Tuscan phenomenon" makes us acknowledge that there is "the Tuscan in each of us" (158), primarily because of its underlying humanism. She is able to call Tuscany her spiritual home and it was there that she became a writer. Hazzard furthermore claims, with a good reason, that Tuscany, its humanism, the

Renaissance art, had an important place in influencing European literature and a comparatively small role in shaping Australian literature due to its remoteness and inaccessibility. Would David Malouf, after almost twenty years since then, agree with this view?

The account by Ania Walwicz, a Polish-born Australian (migrant) author (the term “migrant” has to be put in brackets, for she once said she was no migrant writer but merely a fat one...), a performance poet and prose writer, is written in a special idiosyncratic style, revealing her migrant “roots”. It is a comic and satirical representation of Australian-European connections, in the form of a flow of random ideas and thoughts, without using the appropriate marks of punctuation or capital letters, which is to indicate not only that she does not want to impose constrictions on the narrative but also that she is not an Australian-born, a migrant writer, who is not able to master the English language quite as yet, one who tries to disclaim Ludwig Wittgenstein's contention that the limitations of one's language are the limitations of one's world. Her world continues to live on in a literary mode which can be described as an extreme form of the stream-of-consciousness technique or even the surrealist technique of “automatic writing”. It surely is intended to be provocative and it may be perhaps too form-conscious, however, it reveals some basic facts about Europe from the point of view of a European-born (migrant) Australian:

i'm europe deluxe nougat bar i'm better than most i'm really special
rich and tasty black forest cake this picture makes me think of
germany make me made me europe made me i keep my europe i
europe this town is just like my polish town where born where is
where am here is europe all the time for me in me is europe i keep it i
got it i get it in me inside me is europe italy warm palms lovely palace
chrome chair street busy alive... (184)

In the last, fourth section “Out of the Cold: Testing Political Climates” there are travel accounts focused more on the social and political climate in individual especially East European countries, ranging from the demonstrations against the war in Algeria in France, the Irish political climate, to the Russian and (East) German images before the fall of the Iron Curtain, symbolized by the former Berlin wall. Vincent Buckley revisits his Ireland in the mid-fifties, which was then “crammed with unemployment” (211). Judah Waten, a novelist and essayist born in Odessa of a Jewish family, tries to recapture in his town of birth, Odessa, the time and the *esprit* described to him by his mother and father. However, in the Soviet Union the images he had had about it do not match the present, which points to a common discrepancy between what a traveller expects to find in a place and which is seldom there when he gets there. If Dymphna Cusack's account of Leningrad is strictly documentary and celebratory of Leningrad, then Murray Bail's “Leningrad” from his ironic treatment of Australians abroad in the novel *Homesickness* (1981) is much less complimentary and echoes certain aspects of the totalitarian regime which regarded all foreigners with suspicion. The symbolic description, which has political connotations and an ironic undertone, is to be

found at the very beginning (“The cold exhilarated us” 228), but after his arrival to the customs an officer is particularly curious about his Penguin book *Secret Agent*:

He kept turning the pages and reading a paragraph at random, turning back, then forward. Trying to determine ... I don't know. He saw the photograph of Trotsky in uniform and stared at me. Speckled green eyes: I saw the forests of Russia there. Eyes of a similar fractured perspective belonged to the guard in the buttoned overcoat checking each face - and mine - in the line at Lenin's tomb, close to the wall and the ashes of Reed and the cosmonauts.

This was Leningrad. ... (229)

The selection in *Changing Places: Australian Writers in Europe* is too diverse and comprehensive to draw any single conclusion, which would amount to a generalization of sorts. Instead, an article written by G. Raines should be mentioned, about what he calls a “subgenre of Australian travel-in-Europe tales” (Raines 69), about the literary characters who visit various European countries, e.g. Germany, Greece, Italy, Belgium, Switzerland, Denmark, etc. He does, however, venture to make some general overall observations of the works with European settings produced by a variety of Australian authors, which shows just how very much this sub-genre is alive in Australian literature, for example by Christina Stead, George Johnston, David Meredith, Charmian Clift, Patrick White, Moris Lurie, Hal Porter, Beverly Farmer, David Malouf, Michael Wilding, and a host of others. The author initially admits that in all these “tales” there at first emerges the question of self-definition, of Australian nationality and character and then goes on to quote Anna Couani, who believes that there is in Australian travel writing “an *absence* of Australian character, a kind of neutrality” (Raines 68) and Frank Moorhouse who, very much to the point it seems, believes that after all “travel is not only about encounters with foreign ways or the trying-on of foreign styles, it is an encounter with one's nationality...it is nationality, 'being Australian', which sets the shape of discourse and interaction” (Moorhouse 2). Raines furthermore observes in that while English travel stories are rarely death-perceiving Australian travel writing set in Europe shows just the opposite (the comparison is perhaps too far-fetched):

Predominant are images of thoughtful, observant, sometimes insecure people, who sense that they do not belong. Sometimes they experience delight in different cultures, and pleasure in famous artefacts, but more often they experience suspicion and disillusion, and, almost invariably, apprehensions of suffering and death in a place which in most cases seems alien and, in some, even malicious towards them (Raines 78).

There is “a malaise”, he notes, that Australians encounter in Europe, during their journey into a kind of “Heart of Darkness”. If Joseph Conrad's term, among other things, also reflects the European colonization of Africa, would this new usage then signify “(post)colonialisation” in reverse, a psychological self-projection, or else? True enough, various European socio-cultural contexts,

settings, landscapes, lifestyles, culture, roots, etc, do bring out a certain unknown Other in Australian literary travellers, their anguishes, sufferings, fears, longings,... but is it not that European (and other) travellers experience the same while abroad in Australia?

Although not a selection of travel writing by Australians abroad, the recently published book *Australia: A Traveler's Literary Companion* (Ross 1998) ought to be mentioned in this context, too. Published in the U.S.A., it is primarily intended for American readership, though not exclusively, for (literary) travellers coming to Australia. There are twenty-five short stories presented, drawn from the Aboriginal accounts and legends to Peter Carey's short story "American Dreams", which touches on many subjects that dominate the modern Australian thinking, including "the selling of Australia as a tourist destination specializing in nostalgia" (xiii). The editor is confronted with a major question: what do travellers that read expect to find in literature that they cannot find in history or other reference books? Thea Astley's famous statement best serves the purpose, namely that literary truth is derived from the parish, and if it is truth it will be universal.

Another case of "autostereotyping", aimed at travellers coming to Australia in 2000, is a most recently published book *A Sea Change: Australian Writing and Photography*, to accompany the Olympic Games held in Australia in 2000, published by the Sydney Organising Committee. The selection shows how, in turn, Australia and Australians "wish" to be perceived by foreigners and visitors to Australia. This anthology of stories, essays and photographs (from Robert Drewe, Louis Nowra, David Malouf to the less established *literati*) is the central project of the 1998 cultural festival "A Sea of Change", part of the four-year Olympic Arts Festivals, "a focus for the arts all around Australia, with an emphasis on the cultural impact of immigration" (5). The metaphoric meaning of the title is to be understood as transformation: Australia wants its cultural life to be seen by the world as something constantly evolving, constantly being transformed by more than 200 years of immigration, alongside the rich ancient culture of the indigenous people, a nation (although not with a republican future) reinventing national symbols, practices and occasions. The editor Adam Shoemaker makes it clear in his introduction: "What is the sea change in Australia today? What is the new face of the nation? How does writing and photography reflect the interaction between Indigenous, European and Asian cultures?" (9). How to portray Australia to the rest of the world? This anthology is "not... some sort of touristic reflection of Australian natural beauty" (11). Rather, the depth of Australia's culture is emphasised in the book, not through uncritical assertions, but through creative engagement with various issues, personalities and individual lives. For, contemporary Australia in transformation on all levels of life can only be defined as a multiple society, a multiple personality, whose "change is, paradoxically, the constant; transformation /is/ the unifying feature" (11).

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