

Australian Literature In 1962

By JUDAH WATEN

THE DEMOCRATIC TRADITION

NINETEEN-SIXTY-TWO saw an intensification of the battle against the democratic-realist tradition in Australian writing.

In many articles in the literary pages of the daily press and in literary magazines, on TV and radio, at the "Cultural Freedom" seminar on "Little magazines", and in the "Overland discussion on the Australian Myth", the democratic-realist tradition was roundly denounced, declared to be artistically inferior to the contemporary psychological and symbolic writing which allegedly penetrates more deeply into something called "Life". "Life" it would seem consists of a certain biological phenomenon and mental disorder. This type of writing in 1962, following the pattern of current American literature, has moved through a phase of psychiatric case histories, decadent private fantasies and melodramas. As in much modern painting and music this writing turns its back on recognizable reality and retreats into meaningless symbolism. Add to this a strong dose of mysticism and religious fervour and you have some of the significant features of the much vaunted anti-realist-metaphysical trend.

At the same time democratic-realist writing has been portrayed as standing where it stood twenty and even fifty years ago, atrophied, tradition-bound, unable to cope with the complexities of modern life. This is demonstrably untrue.

The democratic tradition established by Francis Adams, Henry Lawson, Joseph Furphy, Bernard O'Dowd and Mary Gilmore inspired the subsequent school of Australian novelists: it created a national literature, a blood stream that ran through our most important writers—Richard, Palmer, Dark, Davison, Mann, Herbert, Furnley Maurice, Fitzgerald, Tennant, Marshall, Casey and Morrison.

In all the criticism of the democratic-realist tradition there can be discerned a political-ideological trend—basically opposition to the Labour movement and to the ideals of Socialism. This is clearly expressed in "Australian Civilisation," a collection of essays edited by Peter Coleman, associate editor of the "Bulletin". The majority of these essays, taken together constitute a kind of anti-democratic, intellectual NCC manifesto.

Similarly in the "Overland" discussion (Autumn 1962) the criticism of the democratic trend was accompanied by a political attack on the left.

THE OTHER TRADITION

The anti-realist tradition has its roots in reactionary 19th century European thought and in the concept of a ruling elite, carefully nurtured by the offspring of the rulers of a convict-serf society. Its earliest adherents embraced as their guide Nietzsche, the author of the superman philosophy. Such writers as Norman Lindsay, the poets Brennan and Baylebridge for example, shows the influence of Nietzschean ideas and A. D. Hope is in the words of the Times Literary Supplement (January 11, 1963) "something of a Zarathustra."

This tradition was also influenced by the French symbolists and the leading right wing literary figures of the 20th century English speaking world, T. E. Hulme, T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound, the American poet and fascist collaborator who was praised in "Quadrant" by Noel Stock, former literary editor of Eric Butler's anti-semitic "New Times."

Today in Australia its exponents include the editor of "Quadrant," a member of the D.L.P. executive, Catholic poet, James McAuley, who attacks the literature of the last few centuries, finds refuge in authority, the Middle Ages and classicism and detests any concept of social progress. And ironically Max Harris whom McAuley exposed is now at one with him in denouncing democratic-realist writers.

But perhaps the outstanding work of the metaphysical and anti-realist tradition is that of Patrick White, in official circles the most highly praised novelist in Australia. He has even been described in Max Harris's "Australian Book Review" (Jan., 1963) as "probably the greatest English writer at work today."

It is by no means unanimously accepted that Patrick White belongs to this tradition. Some critics have argued that the strong element of realism and satire in his work actually places him on the democratic side.

Yet it is taken for granted by most literary critics that Patrick White, in the words of Jack Beasley in the "Realist Writer" (September, 1962), "not only stands outside the democratic realist tradition . . . but in fact stands against it."

For instance the Times Literary Supplement on January 11, 1963, pertinently remarked that, "with 'The Tree of Man' and 'Voss' we are back to Nietzsche, The Nietzschean ghost in Australia is, after more than half a century, far from laid."

In an essay on Patrick White's novel "Riders in the Chariot" in "Southernly" Nov. 2, 1962, Dr. Colin Roderick wrote:

" . . . the tender-minded optimist who looks for happiness on a future existence will find congenial thought in the pantheistic, semi-philosophical semi-mythological mysticism of this book. But the humanist, who looks for ethical and moral self-realisation in this one poor life, will reject its basic philosophy."

Discussing the four principal characters in the novel, Dr. Roderick said they "appear to me to express something of perplexity in their author's mind, as if he has discovered, to his dismay, that reason and rational thought are as feathers when weighed in the scale against instinct and intuition."

A similar view of the four characters was advanced by David Bradley in his article on "The Riders in the Chariot" in the April, 1962 issue of "Overland":

"They are united by their suffering, by humility, by the rejection of men, by their mutual vision of the deep horror of life, and especially of the life guided by Reason; by their patient cultivation in the darkness-of-which the flesh might at any moment remember."

Patrick White's explicit belief in an elite and his anti-reason outweigh his criticism of elitism and his satire. His mysticism, his concepts of instinct and intuition are nothing but aspects of fin-de-siecle 20th century literary decadence. His total inability to imagine a rational solution of man's illness and his pessimistic belief that man remains unchanged in his soul which is born evil makes him the clearest example of a metaphysical-anti-realist, and hence acceptable to the ruling class in our time, regardless of his intentions.

The ruling class of Australia through all its propaganda and academic agencies lauds the anti-realist-metaphysical trend because it does not offer the people any clarity but contributes to confusion, especially among intellectuals who either believe in or want to believe in the possibility of progress.

An anti-realist approach which is labelled realist also creates the additional danger, at least for a while, of diverting writers from realism, particularly young writers.

This struggle between opposing forces in our literature is part of the literary battle raging throughout the capitalist world especially in the USA, where the literary right at the beginning of the cold war launched a great onslaught on the democratic humanist tradition in American literature. An American literary magazine back in 1949 gave a name to the two opposing forces in American literature and it called them "redskins" and "paleface" represented by Walt Whitman and Henry James respectively. It also pointed out that American writers grouped themselves round these two polar types. The "redskins" reflected the life of the frontier and of the big cities and the "palefaces, the thin, semi-clerical culture of Boston and Concord." Among the "redskins" were such great writers as Theodore Dreiser, Sherwood Anderson and Sinclair Lewis, and it is pre-

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cisely the "redskins" who are now heavily under fire just like the democratic writers in Australia.

A YEAR OF ADVANCE

Yet 1962 was a year of advance for the democratic-realist trend. During the year outstanding books in this tradition were published by the Australasian Book Society. These were Gavin Casey's "Amid the Plenty," John Morrison's "23," Ron Tullipan's "March into Morning" and Alan Marshall's "This is the Grass," which was also published in England and by Cheshire's in Australia for the general public.

Gavin Casey's novel "Amid the Plenty" gives a picture of contemporary unemployment which has become a feature of Australian society for the first time since the end of the war. Unemployment is now of course a permanent aspect of life in most capitalist countries, but not so long ago it was said by the press, capitalist politicians and theoreticians of all kinds, to have been abolished. This belief affected whole sections of the people with the result that the new wave of unemployment in the midst of apparent prosperity has had a devastating psychological effect on many of its unprepared victims. This is the problem which Gavin Casey depicts with insight and feeling.

"Twenty Three" stories by John Morrison has added to his already considerable fame as a short story writer. It was widely reviewed in the press and even right-wing critics have conceded that these stories are authentic pictures of Australian life. This collection includes such outstanding stories as "Bo Abbott," a study of a militant waterside worker and "Morning Glory," a picture of the bourgeois mentality which places property above life.

"March into Morning" by Ron Tullipan was selected by the "Sydney Sun" as one of the three best Australian novels of the year. With this novel Ron Tullipan has consolidated the reputation as a novelist of distinction that he made with his first novel "Follow the Sun" which was also published by the ABS.

In "March into Morning," Ron Tullipan embarked on a more ambitious theme, the making of a class conscious worker, a theme that is attracting more and more realist writers.

The last ABS book of the year was Alan Marshall's "This is the Grass," the continuation of his "I Can Jump Puddles," the second volume of his projected four-volume autobiography.

In this book Alan Marshall has set out to give a picture of his early manhood, his difficulties in finding work because of his disabilities due to polio. He shows how the employers, when they did offer him work, looked upon him as a source of cheap labour.

There are brilliant cameos of Australian city life in "This is the Grass" as well as social criticism. In this book Alan Marshall reaffirms his deep and lasting faith in man and his future.

The publication by the ABS in the tenth year of its existence of such four distinguished writers as Gavin Casey, John Morrison, Ron Tullipan and Alan Marshall is additional proof of the high prestige of the Society. It has been one of the major forces making for the continuation of the democratic tradition in Australian literature.

Of the realist books published during the year by commercial publishers mention should be made of the anthology of "Modern" Australian Humor, edited by Bill Wannan which includes most of Australia's realist writers from Henry Lawson's original "Very Strange Tales" a critical account of Australian politics and affairs during the convict period. He also gives a horrifying picture of the treatment of the Aborigines of that time. Thousands had been slaughtered by 1838 and it was official opinion that murder was not even manslaughter if committed on a "black."

The novel "Yaralie" (Georgian House, Melbourne) by the talented novelist Donald Stuart, the author of "Yandy", contains many vivid and sympathetic pictures of the aborigines of the extreme north of West Australia. Donald Stuart has a remarkable knowledge of the modern aborigine and his knowledge of the idiom of speech of the aborigines is probably unequalled in Australia.

Perhaps some of the most notable poems to appear during 1962 were in the "Realist Writer." They were distinguished for their social content and clarity of expression. The poems of Dorothy Hewett and Denis Kevans deserve special mention.

Of the collection of poetry the most outstanding I believe was Roland Robinson's "Deep Well." He is not only a great nature poet but he sings of the aborigines with rare sensitiveness and understanding.

CONCLUSION

This list of prose and poetry by no means exhausts the works of distinction by progressive Australian writers. These include novels by Australians living abroad, like the world famous writer James Aldridge.

Altogether, then, 1962 saw the appearance of many fine books of a democratic realist character, convincing proof that the democratic tradition is still a great force in our literature, despite the attacks on it. A line of influence of such persistence and strength can only be explained by its constant close affinity with the people. It is after all only the democratic and social realistic writers who face up to the real problems of the real man, problems in which the emancipation of humanity is posed. It is just because of this that the democratic tradition will not disappear; it will no more disappear than the forces of progress which nourish it.